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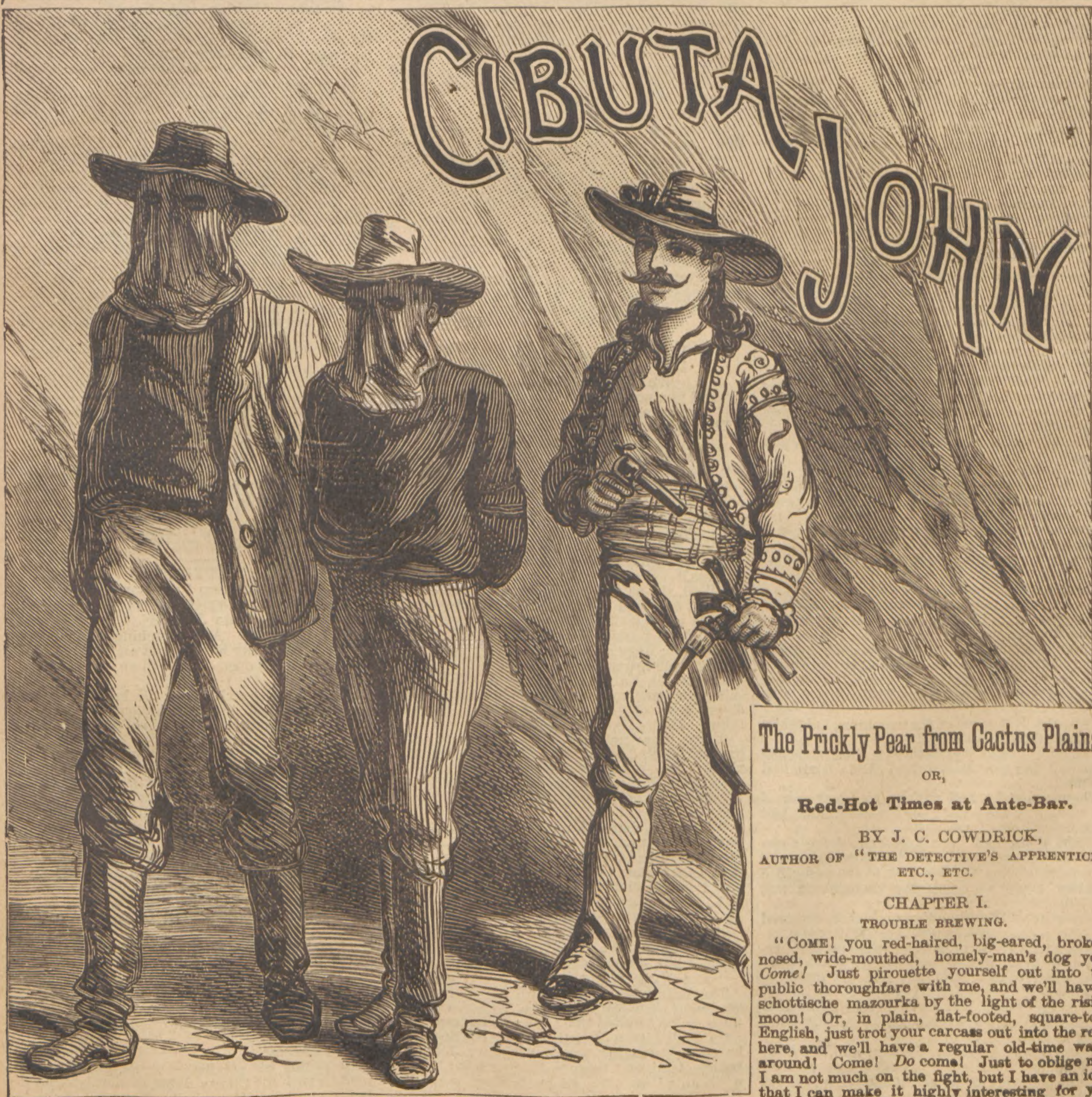
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The Prickly Pear from Cactus Plains;

OR,

Red-Hot Times at Ante-Bar.

BY J. C. COWDRICK,
AUTHOR OF "THE DETECTIVE'S APPRENTICE,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE BREWING.

"COME! you red-haired, big-eared, broken-nosed, wide-mouthed, homely-man's dog you! Come! Just pirouette yourself out into the public thoroughfare with me, and we'll have a schottische mazourka by the light of the rising moon! Or, in plain, flat-footed, square-toed English, just trot your carcass out into the road here, and we'll have a regular old-time walk-around! Come! Do come! Just to oblige me! I am not much on the fight, but I have an idea that I can make it highly interesting for you while it lasts. Come! you bow-legged son of a

CIBUTA, WITH HIS HUMILIATED PRISONERS, STARTED FOR ANTE-BAR.

bob-tailed centipede! and I'll stick you so full of prickly-pear prickles that you can't sneeze! I'm Cibuta John, the Prickly Pear from Cactus Plains!"

Such was the generous and whole-souled invitation that was extended one evening to the bully of the town of Ante-Bar; and the man who held out such alluring inducements in connection with his vehement and urgent request, is worthy of description.

He was of medium height, with a supple, athletic figure, broad shouldered and straight. His head was of splendid shape, modeled in bold lines, and poised with an easy and unconscious dignity and grace.

His face was a bold patrician-like and handsome one, the features being clear-cut and regular. His eyes were black and bright, his complexion was dark, a wealth of dark-brown hair rested upon his shoulders, and a gracefully curving mustache shaded his mouth.

He was, perhaps, thirty years of age; certainly not more.

He was attired in a rich, full Mexican costume, and wore a costly sombrero upon his head, while attached to his heels were a pair of handsome silver spurs.

At first glance, any one would have taken him to be a Mexican gentleman.

No Mexican was he, however.

He was an American, born and bred—a genuine son of old "Kaintuck."

Why, then, his Mexican attire?

Because, for several years just previously to the time we write of, he had been a sojourner in that land. He was just from the town of Cibuta, in the Sonora country, where he had received the euphonious appellation he bore—"Cibuta" John.

His title fitted him well, and the latter portion of it especially so. He had, on one occasion, single-handed and alone, in fair fight, whipped four of the worst characters of the town—veritable "Greaser" gorillas; and from that moment he was called the "cactus *espinoso* of the llano cactus." Or, as the Americans rendered it—the "prickly pear of the cactus plains."

His fame had spread for miles and miles around, and he was alike feared and respected.

It had not, however, preceded him to the town of Ante-Bar, which lies many miles distant from Cibuta, in a northeasterly direction.

This man's Christian name was—a very popular one—Jones; simply Jones. Not a very striking name for the hero of a story, we will admit; but the veracious historian must not deviate from grim facts, and the grim fact in this instance is, the man's name was simply John Jones.

The "other feller," he of the red hair, big ears, etc., needs no description. The verbatim exclamation with which this chapter opens, portrays him perfectly.

We may add, however, that he was almost a giant in size, big of bone and strong of arm, and half-filled with whisky and chock-full of fight.

He was the terror of the town.

And, strange to say, *his* name, too, was Jones. Not only that, but it was *John* Jones.

Thereby hangs a tale.

Throughout this story we will distinguish them, one from the other, by using the adjective prefixes to their names—"Cibuta" John and "Giant" John; for "Giant" the bully was called.

This, the first scene of the romance, is laid in the post-office at Ante-Bar.

The stage-coach had arrived a short time before, and the postmaster had just distributed the mail.

The moment he had so done, and had opened his window to the public, the first man there had been Giant John Jones.

Giant John had been a citizen of the town about two years, and in all that time had never once missed being the first man at the post-office window every mail-day the moment it was opened.

Never in all that time though had he received a letter, postal-card, paper, or anything else.

Judge of the surprise then when on this particular evening a letter, a dainty, white-enveloped missive, had been put into his ungainly paw.

Even he himself had seemed greatly astonished, and had acted as though he hardly knew what to do with it.

There it was, however, a letter; and, for *him*! And he had strutted away from the window with as pompous an air as though he owned the whole world and a little more.

The next man at the window had been "Cibuta" John Jones.

"Have you a letter for John Jones?" he had asked.

And the postmaster had answered:

"I had sich a letter a moment ago,
But it was called for, my dear sir, an' so,
I am sorry to say, it is gone."

Here we must digress again for a moment, to introduce the postmaster. He is worthy of our notice. Imagine a tall, thin-faced, white-haired, old man, with a long, white beard, and you will see him, in your mind's eye, exactly as he was, and is. His name is Daniel Derrick; better known as "Uncle Dan."

Uncle Dan has a hobby, and that hobby is poetry. Poetry, to him, is food and drink. It is everything. His whole soul runs to poetry, and his poetry and he are together running to seed. Not to say that he does not still court the gentle muse, for he does; but his ardor is not as it was in the elysian days of his youth.

Far and near, Uncle Dan is known as the "Poet o' Ante-Bar."

"Poet," however, he can not, with strict regard for truth and propriety, be called. He is, to the true poet, what a common fiddler is to an expert violinist. He is a rhymester; nothing more.

Uncle Dan has a rhyme for every occasion. He seldom speaks except in rhyme. Ask him a question, and he will answer you in a jingle of verse; iambic, trochaic, anapaestic, or dactylic—in measure of a go-as-you-please sort. Whenever he has an odd moment, he can be found writing; and some of his effusions have actually found their way into print.

So much for "Uncle" Daniel Derrick.

Cibuta John had been not a little surprised to find himself answered in rhyme. It had surprised him more, however, to learn that a letter addressed to him had been called for.

Let us mention, right here, that Cibuta John had just arrived in town. He had come in the stage-coach mentioned as having arrived a few minutes before.

"Will you please tell me who it was who called for the letter?" he had asked.

And again had Uncle Dan answered in rhyme, pointing the man out as he did so, as follows:

"D'ye see that big man over thar,
Wi' stogy boots an' fire-red ha'r—
Ther one wi' no hat on?
Wal, he's th' one who called fer it,
His name's John Jones; ter him it fit.
We call him 'Giant' John."

"Did you notice the post-mark?" Cibuta John had next asked.

The reply had been:

"Sich trifles seldom miss my eye;
It was from Tiptonville, K—y."
"Then, by heavens! it's mine!" and Cibuta John had at once strode over to where Giant John stood.

"Sir," he had said, politely, "is your name John Jones?"

"Yes, sir; it are!" the bully had answered.

"And you have just received a letter?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, as my name, too, is John Jones, and as I expected to find a letter here for me, it is quite possible that the one you received is mine. Will you allow me to look at it?"

"No, sir; nary a look!"

"Sir! you are unreasonable!"

"Not a bit, I ain't! I am the John Jones o' this heur burg, an' this heur letter says 'John Jones, Town of Ante-Bar;' tharfore, it must be mine! You're no citizen heur!"

"True, I am not; but I am here now, and I expected to find a letter awaiting me on my arrival. The postmaster tells me this letter is from Tiptonville, Kentucky. There is where I expect one from, and now I demand to see it!"

"You kin demand, an' keep on demandin'; but you won't see it!" the giant bully had cried. And he crushed the letter in his hand and thrust it into his pocket. "Come! Git out o' my way, you Mexican cuss with a Yankee name!" And as he spoke he gave Cibuta John an angry push aside, and strode toward the door.

Then it was that Cibuta John, white with rage, had clutched the giant by the arm and whirled him around, exclaiming:

"Come! you red-haired, big-eared," etc., etc.

The bully fairly howled with rage! He turned green! He, the bully—the king-bee of the town, to be insulted thus! It was too much!

"I don't kear a Fourth o' July continental!" he cried, "whether you're Cibeauty John, Cibeauty Jake, or Cibeauty Jim; or what kind of a 'beauty' ye are; ye can't skeer me! I'm Giant John o' Ante-Bar, I am, an' don't you furgit it!"

"And I don't care if you are a giant, you've

got to fork over that letter! It is mine, and you've got to give it up! Come! you loud-mouthed, slab-sided, lantern-jawed, crooked-backed son of a Texan tarantula, you! Come! Just sashay yourself out here into the highway, and we'll dance a Portuguese polka in six-eight time! I am, usually, one of the most peaceable fellows you ever saw, but when a great, big, animated and ungainly mountain of ignorance like you gives me a push, said mountain of ignorance has got to fight! Now, if you *won't* come out, I'll get down to business right here! I'll polish up the floor with you till you can't stand on it! Come out! Do come! I am fairly aching to pitch into you, and I want plenty of room! I also want that letter, and I'm going to have it, too!"

"Wal, I'd like ter see ye git it! You're mighty fly with your tongue, but you can't skeer Giant John fer a cent! Why! you cussed Mexican-dressed dude! ef I went out inter th' road wi' you, thar wouldn't be enough of you left ter hold an inquest over! You don't know me! I'm th' boss o' this heur town, I am, an' don't you furgit it!"

"That suits me all the better! I always like to begin right at the top of the pile! Come now, hand over my letter, come out and fight, or else take a 'licking' right here!"

"I tell ye th' letter ain't yourn, an' I 'peal to th' crowd! Say, feller-citizens, don't it stand ter reason that this heur letter are mine? I have lived heur fer two years or more, an' everybody knows John Jones o' Ante-Bar."

Not a man in the crowd dared to raise his voice against the giant.

His prowess was too well known.

"It certainly looks ez ef it hed orter be yourn," said one Jem Patterson, "seein' ez it are th' first one that ever kem fer ye, fer ye've watched ther mail purty faithful fer two years."

"And," said Cibuta John, "does it not stand just as much to reason that the letter is mine? I came here expecting to find one, and the postmaster tells me this one is from the very place I expected mine to come from. Besides, if this galoot has never before received a letter, the chances are that *this* one is not his. All I ask is to see the letter, and then if it proves not to be mine, I will shut right up and treat the crowd. Is that not fair enough?"

"Yes," some one ventured to say, "that's fair! Giant John can't object to that!"

"But Giant John *does* object to it, Bill Twicker," the bully retorted; "an' he won't show it ter no man! What's this heur town a-comin' to? Can't a man git a letter 'thout havin' ter show it ter any jackanapes as wants ter see it? This heur dockymint is in my name, an' no other man kin have it! That's flat! Git out o' my way, ye half-breed Greaser! I'm goin' home!" And once more he gave Cibuta John a push aside.

That push capped the climax.

The fun began in earnest.

CHAPTER II.

A WHIPPED "TERROR."

"Oh! you cross-eyed son of a ring-tailed chimpanzee!" Cibuta John cried. "You will have it, will you?" And, clutching the giant by the neck, he swung him around and wafted him out through the open door with an ease that was surprising.

Nor, did he let go his hold till he had landed his man clear out into the middle of the road.

"Now! you hump-backed son of a whisky still! you've got to fight! If you don't, I'll take you by the slack of your breeches and the back of your neck, and run you into the creek!"

The creek mentioned was a lively and deep one, only a short distance away.

The bully needed no further invitation.

His Dutch, or Irish, or whatever blood he could lay claim to, was fully roused.

"He, the bully of Ante-Bar, to be insulted, mauled around, and generally mussed-up thus!"

He could not—*would* not stand it!

The taunting cries of his fellow-citizens ringing in his ears only served to anger him the more.

"Good-by, John!" Bill Twicker had cried, as Cibuta snatched the giant out of the room.

"Don't stay long!" Jem Patterson had added.

And a dozen other exclamations had greeted his ears.

"Look out fer yerself!" he cried, "I'm a-comin' fer ye!"

And he came.

He swung his ponderous arms around, and made a rush for Cibuta John, evidently expecting to annihilate him wholly at one fell swoop.

But he had never made a greater mistake in his life.

Cibuta John met him more than half-way, and a blow from his iron-like fist laid the bully out flat upon his back in the twinkling of an eye.

"Come to time, Giant!" cried Bill Twicker.

"What be ye a-doin' down there?" asked Jem Patterson.

"Climb right up, Sally, an' git in yer fine work," some one else called out.

And so it went.

The crowd cheered and hooted like wild men. Giant John sprung up with a howl of rage and pain, and made another terrible onslaught. Again he went to the ground in a most inglorious manner.

"Come! you mighty chief, you terror of the whole town!" cried Cibuta John. "Why don't you stand up long enough to give me a little fun? I can't get any enjoyment out of you *this* way, not a cent's worth. Come. Do come! I'll make it pleasant for you, I assure you."

How the crowd around did hoot and yell!

To see the terror meet his match at last, was rare enjoyment indeed!

The whole town turned out, and came rushing to the scene of action.

"Come, Giant John! scramble up an' go in!" cried Bill Twicker. "Why, my little dorg Sancho heur, kin make a better showin' in a fight than *you* are makin'."

Again the bully sprung up, but this time he did not pitch in with such ardor.

He realized that he had met a tough customer.

Getting himself into position, he approached cautiously, his arms well in advance, and swinging his body in true pugilistic style of the brag-gadocio sort.

And as he advanced, he cried:

"So, you're up to a little science, be ye? Wal, I'll see what ye kin do this heur time. Look out now!" And he struck out.

"Yes, I'm looking out," Cibuta John replied, as he parried the blow with ease. "What is it you want me to look out for? For you? Well, I am looking out. Come, now; let's see what you're going to do."

What he wanted to do, Giant John was trying hard to show by practical illustration; but somehow he couldn't make it work. He did some fine sparring, and sent in some terrible blows; but his adversary never happened to be there when the blows arrived.

"Well, you are a healthy specimen to be called the bully of a town!" Cibuta John cried, tauntingly. "You would make a good man to drive hogs to feed, you red-nosed porpus! But as a fighter you don't amount to shucks. Come! Wake up!"

And the Giant *did* wake up.

Cibuta made a charge; he struck out with his left, followed it up quickly with his right, and Giant John turned a complete somerset and landed upon his back with a force that made him groan; he had reason to think a mule had kicked him.

"Are ye comin' back this week?" Bill Twicker cried out.

Again the crowd roared with laughter.

"No," said one Jeff Parsons; "I guess he'll stay over Sunday!"

"Shall we send yer clothes?" asked Jem Patterson.

Giant John sat up and glared foolishly around. "Did anybody see a mule kick me?" he asked. "Did a flash of lightning cut th' pigeon-wing around my head? or was it a can of diameter exploded?"

"Have you had enough?" asked Cibuta John.

"Enough o' what?" the bully inquired, looking around in his direction.

"Enough fight. Enough left-handed and right-duked proboscis lubricant. Come! don't keep the audience waitin'! Besides, I haven't had any supper!"

"Much 'bliged to ye," said Giant John, with a sickly grin, "but I guess I won't come. I've got enough. I don't want no more."

"Fully satisfied, are you?"

"Yes, I've got a stummickful. I don't want no more at all."

"Oh! come, Giant!" cried the irrepressible Bill Twicker, "don't give it up so! Wade in once more, jest fer luck."

"No sir-ee! No more wadin' in fer me!"

"Jest one more round, Giant!" pleaded Jem Patterson.

"Nixey! I'm done! No more fer me *this* evenin', if ye please!"

And as the bully replied, he got upon his feet again and proceeded to straighten the kinks out of himself.

"Then," said Cibuta, "perhaps you have concluded to hand over that letter and let me see it."

"Oh! thunder! I had forgot all about th' letter, in th' excitement of our little walk-around! Yes, I have concluded that it must belong ter you. Heer it air, a little rumbled up, but I guess th' stuffin' is all thar. I figgered it out ez fur ez 'My dear John,' an' as nobody ever calls me 'dear,' I guess it's yourn." And the bully passed the letter over to its rightful owner.

"Now, gentlemen," said Cibuta John, "if you will step back into the post-office with me for a moment, I will tell you whether this letter belongs to me or not. If it does not, then I shall be most happy to return it to Mr. Giant John, and ask his pardon. I think however, there is no doubt about its being mine."

The crowd followed him back into the post-office.

There Cibuta unfolded the letter, and immediately said:

"Yes, gentlemen, it is mine. I can easily prove it to you. Here are other letters from the same person, addressed to me at Cibuta. You can see at a glance that the writing is the same."

And as he spoke he drew from his pocket three or four other envelopes, all in the same hand-writing and all bearing the same post-mark.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked.

"Yes," some one answered, "it is clear that the letter is yours."

The crowd echoed their acquiescence in that opinion, and the postmaster remarked:

"Yes, feller-citizens, it seems clear th' letter belongs ter this man heur. These older ones heur that bear his name, All are written jest about ther same. But, if he intends ter settle down An' become a citizen o' this town, I have got an idee in my mind To stop further trouble of this kind. An' then, when a letter comes, I'll know To which man I am ter let it go. Let one have 'John Jones' writ tharon; The other one 'Cibuta John.'"

"That is a good idea," said Cibuta. "I will notify my correspondents at once. I certainly expect to settle down here, and remain for some time."

"I guess there won't be much trouble about your letters," remarked Bill Twicker. "Giant John never gets any."

The postmaster now called the attention of the crowd, and said:

"Heur, pards, is a letter from afar, Fer Daniel Derrick o' Ante-Bar. I think 'tis about that schoolmarm biz; But I'll open an' see jest what it is."

Cibuta John was about to leave the post-office, but, hearing the word "schoolmarm," he stopped and turned back.

Uncle Dan opened the letter, and, perhaps lamenting the fact that it was not written in rhyme, read as follows:

"OMAHA, NEB.,
"July 6, 18—."

"DANIEL DERRICK, Esq.,
"Chairman of Board of Education,
"Town of Ante-Bar:—"

"DEAR SIR:—I am en route to your town to accept the position. Having carefully studied the route and time-guides, I expect to reach there on the 10th. Very truly yours,
"CLARA ST. CLARE."

"Bully fer Clara!" shouted Bill Twicker. "Forty years of age, wears blue spectacles, an' carries a green umbrella! That's her descrip', I'll bet my dorg Sancho ag'in' a jack-rabbit! That's yer shemale schoolmarm, out an' out!"

"Yes," added Jem Patterson, "red ha'r, freckled face, an' tall an' angular, wi' an angelic expression of countenance sour enough ter scare th' kids o' this town into fits. Isthat right, Bill?"

"That's her, right to a dot!" cried Bill. "An' say, Jem, Jeff Parsons heur orter slick up a bit, an' maybe he kin ketch her fer a wife."

"That's so, Jeff; ye must trot out that frilled shirt o' yourn, sure!"

Bill and Jem were both married, and each had a large family.

Jeff Parsons groaned aloud at the prospect.

"Oh! not any fer me! Not any fer me, if ye please!" he exclaimed. "Heur's Tom Billings, though, he might—"

"No! not any fer me, neither! I don't want one!" the man mentioned assured at once. "Not any fer me!"

"When does th' letter say she are a-comin', Uncle Dan?" Bill Twicker asked.

And the aged dispenser of extemporaneous poesy immediately replied:

"Th' sixteenth, if I read aright; An' that will be ter-morrer night."

"It don't give us much time ter fix up for th'

occasion, anyhow," said Jem Patterson. "You young fellers will have ter dust around lively."

"Thar'll be no fixin', ez fur ez I am concerned," Jeff Parsons declared.

"No, nor wi' me either," decided Tom Billings.

Several others of the young men of the Bar echoed similar sentiments.

Cibuta John, meanwhile, simply listened and smiled.

"Well," said Bill Twicker, "I s'pose we fellers of th' Eddication Board will have ter do suthin', eh?"

"Yes, I s'pose so," supplemented Jem Patterson. "Th' school-marm are a-comin' an' we'll have ter welcome her."

Uncle Dan closed the debate by saying:

"We'll meet after supper at th' store, An' talk ther little matter o'er."

CHAPTER III.

THE SILVER DAGGER.

ANTE-BAR, at the time of which we write, was a town of perhaps five or six hundred inhabitants.

And a lively little town it was, too.

Of all the towns for miles and miles around, it stood at the head.

It had passed bravely through its mushroom period of existence, and now seemed an assured and permanent success. Something tangible. Something that could be got hold of and realized to exist.

All around it, towns of the to-day-we are-here-but-to-morrow-we're-gone sort had sprung up, flourished for a brief season, and then passed quietly away—like a blade of grass, which springeth up in the morning and in the evening is cut down. But Ante-Bar had marched slowly and steadily onward to success from the very start.

It was a town about seven years old, and its citizens had begun to feel the need of a school.

The children of the town were all running wild, and steps must be taken to bring them up in the way they should go.

A meeting was called, and it was decided to build a school-house.

Accordingly, one was built.

Then a teacher was wanted.

One was advertised for, and a dozen or so of applications came in.

Then arose the question of which one to choose. Each of the applications seemed to represent an able teacher, and it was no easy matter to decide. Some of the citizens favored a man for the place; others, a woman. And so it stood.

At last a Board of Education was elected, and the members thereof settled the question by a series of games of "seven-up."

The choice fell to a lady applicant, Clara St. Clare, of Tiptonville, Ky. The most distant of all the contestants for the place.

She was notified at once by Uncle Dan Derrick, and in due time a reply came from her that she would come immediately.

And now this letter from Omaha showed that she was on her way, and would no doubt arrive by the stage-coach next evening.

Everybody wondered what she would look like when she arrived, and nearly everybody accepted Bill Twicker's idea of her appearance as a pretty correct guess.

So much in way of explanation.

When Cibuta John left the post-office, he went at once to the principal hotel of the place, the "Faw-drop Inn."

He dropped in. And having done so, he called for supper and engaged a room.

When he had satisfied the cravings of his inner man, he went forth to take a survey of the town, and at the same time enjoy a quiet smoke.

It was a lovely evening. The full moon was about an hour high, and flooded the valley in which the town lay, with its golden, mellow light.

The Dew-drop Inn was located at the northern end of the town, and on leaving it, Cibuta turned his steps up the creek, soon leaving the town behind him altogether.

He was walking slowly and idly along, deeply buried in thought, when of a sudden he caught the gleam of something bright before his eyes, and heard something strike the ground near his feet.

Glancing down, he beheld a tiny silver dagger sticking up in the sod directly in his path.

He stooped and picked it up.

Around its handle was carefully wound a slip of paper. This he removed, and then discovered that there was writing upon it.

Cibuta John was surprised. Where had the dagger come from?

Not a person was to be seen, and the nearest house was a quarter of a mile away.

A short distance behind him, along the path he had come, stood a large cottonwood tree.

He retraced his steps to that, and looked up, but he could see no one.

Where the dagger had come from, was a mystery.

Stepping out into the full moonlight, and aided by the light from his cigar, he read the note.

It was written in a plain, bold feminine hand, and ran as follows:

"Sir:—You are in danger. You have made an enemy of the worst man in Ante-Bar. 'Giant' John is as treacherous as a snake in the grass. He will strike when you least expect it. Be on your guard every moment, night and day.

"From one who would be—

"YOUR FRIEND."

Cibuta John was now surprised indeed.

Who could his unknown friend be?

That it was a female, the writing indicated, but, who was she?

"At any rate," he thought, "I am very much obliged for the warning, though I am not generally to be found asleep with both eyes shut. I will look out for Mr. John Giant—or Giant John. I wonder who the writer of this can be? I must look around and find out. I seem to have a strange fatality for getting into a mess of adventure and mystery whenever I strike a new town. Well, so be it. If Mr. Giant John chips in again, though, I'll give him a taste of prickly-pear that he won't relish."

While his thoughts ran thus, Cibuta had resumed his stroll along the bank of the creek.

Presently he came to a point where the valley began to grow narrow, and where huge boulders lay around in wild confusion—some of them blocking his pathway.

His cigar was growing short, and he was just on the point of turning to retrace his steps, when, suddenly, two masked men sprung out from behind a large rock and confronted him with drawn revolvers.

"Whoop! Hold right up heur!" one of them cried. "We wants a leetle intervoo wi' you, Mr. So-beautiful John, or whatever ye calls yerself! Hold right up, now, an' don't kick over ther traces!"

Cibuta John recognized the voice of the speaker:—it was none other than "Giant" John Jones.

"Well, Giant," he said, coolly, "what is it you want to interview me about?"

Giant John was not a little surprised to find that he was recognized despite his mask.

He put on a bold front, however, and answered: "Wal, we wants ter know what it is brings you ter this heur town o' Ante-Bar?"

"Business, my good John; *business*!"

"An', none o' our business, may be? That it?"

"Exactly."

"Wal, now, look 'e right heur! I want ye ter pack up yer gripsack an' mosey right out o' heur! D'y'e see?"

"Yes, John; I see, and I *don't* see."

"What is it that you don't see?"

"I don't see what right you have to waylay a stranger like this, and order him to leave town. Who are you, anyhow?"

"Wal, afore you kem along I war th' king-bee o' Ante-Bar. Fer two years I have been cock o' th' walk heur, an' I don't propose ter allow a bantam like you ter come in at this late day an' clip my wings! Oh! no, not much! You've got ter pack right up an' make yerself scarce heurabouts! You hear me!"

"My dear Giant," returned Cibuta, "you may keep right on being king-bee of the town. You may be the chieftain of the whole valley, the monarch of all you survey, if you want to; so long as you do not interfere with *me* and *my* interests. I am the most peaceable fellow you ever met. All I want are my rights, and just room enough to prance around in without crowding any one, or being crowded myself. See?"

"Yas, I see. An' don't you see that we've got ther dead-wood on ye?"

"The what?"

"Ther dead-wood—ther drop."

"Oh! yes, I see! But, bless you, boys, that does not frighten me; not a bit. I'm used to it."

"Don't ye know that we mean 'shoot'?"

"No; do you?"

"You jest bet we do! Now, jest look 'e heur! We mean business! We want you to pick right up an' skin out o' this heur burg, jest ez soon ez ye kin! D'y'e onderstand that?"

"And, what if I *don't*?"

"That's ther proper ques ter ask, every time! If ye say ye *won't* go, then we propose ter make cold meat of ye right heur. Now, ye've heard my little song; what d'ye say to it?"

"What is your partner's name?" Cibuta asked, indicating the giant's companion-in-arms.

"Oh! it don't matter ter you, who he are! He echoes *my* senterments, you kin bet on that! Now, open yer head an' sing yer little ditty. Will ye go, or not?"

"Why! you knock-kneed, double-twisted, red-handed sons of Mexican horse-thieves, you, *no*! What do you take me for? Do I look like a tenderfoot? See anything about me to indicate that I'm just from New Jersey? If you have picked me up as a tenderfoot, you'll have to drop me as a hard-shell. Why, I've traveled the highways and byways of the wild West so long that my soles are as tough as cowhide! The thorny ways, rocky roads, ups and downs and vicissitudes of life don't make any impression upon them. I— Hi! look out!"

And suddenly glancing beyond the two men, Cibuta John ducked his head and sprung a step backward.

It was the old, old trick—old, yet ever new.

Giant John and his companion looked quickly around, and the moment they did so Cibuta drew a pair of revolvers and "covered" them, exclaiming:

"Now, dance! you cripples—*dance*! Be very careful not to move your hands, though, for if you do I'll bore you, as sure as you're born! I feel like 'shoot' all over. Now, let your pop-guns drop right down upon the ground!"

The two men obeyed. Too cowardly at heart were they to think of doing otherwise.

"There! that's right," Cibuta assured. "Now, Giant, you tie your partner's hands behind his back— No, don't take off your masks. I want you just as you are, in all your beauty."

"I ain't got nothin' to tie him with," the giant protested, sullenly.

"Tear a strip off of the mainsail of his shirt, then. Anything will do."

But some stout cord was quickly produced, and the giant set about his task; the man's hands were securely bound.

Then in turn Cibuta secured the hands of the giant.

"There!" he exclaimed, when he had finished, "now we are ready to go to town."

"You don't mean ter take us back to ther Bar this way, do ye?" Giant John asked.

"Certainly I do!"

"Wi' these here masks over our faces, too?"

"Yes."

"Don't, pard; *don't*, fer heaven's sake, do it!"

"Why not?"

"They'll take us fer highwaymen."

"Ha, ha, ha! Well, what else *are* you? Did you not waylay me?"

"Yes, we done that; but don't let it out that we was masked. That is the wu'st part of it."

"Can't help it, boys; it is your own funeral. You have brought it upon yourselves. Come, now! forward, march! And, don't forget that I am right behind you!" And Cibuta, with his humiliated prisoners, started for Ante-Bar, he having picked up their weapons from the ground where he had ordered them to be dropped.

The two men begged hard to be "let down easy," and promised eternal friendship to Cibuta, but he was not to be moved.

To town they had to go, and masked, too, just as they were.

When they arrived at the Dew-drop Inn, Cibuta approached a man who was standing on the porch, and said:

"Sir, will you please tell me where I can find the mayor of this town—the alcalde, the burgo-master, or whatever you call the first officer of the place?"

"Yes," the man answered; "very likely you can find him down at Burdock's store. There is some sort of meeting going on there in regard to school matters, I believe."

Cibuta John thanked the man, and then set out to find the store.

When he arrived there with his two prisoners, Uncle Dan Derrick, "th' Poet o' Ante-Bar," was just closing the meeting with the remark:

"An' now, ter-morrer when she comes,

We'll not meet her wi' fives: 'drums;

But let each man be neat an' clean,

An' try ter act in nowise mean.

An', right heur, let me say ter you—

Respect is to a lady, due;

So, fer this once, all you galoots

Jest wear yer pants outside yer boots!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE FATAL BRAND.

BOB BURDOCK'S store was, in a way, the town-hall of Ante-Bar.

There the leading citizens generally congregated of an evening, and there the public business of the town was usually transacted.

On this night in particular the store was well filled.

All eyes were turned upon Cibuta John and his prisoners, the moment they entered.

When the postmaster ceased speaking, Cibuta John asked:

"Will I be interrupting the meeting if I toot my bazoo now?"

"No," was the reply from a dozen or more at once, "go right ahead."

All were anxious to hear his story, and to know all about his prisoners.

"Th' public business now is o'er,

An' you, my dear sir, have the floor,"

declared Uncle Dan, as he sat down.

"Such being the case," responded Cibuta, "I'll come to the point. First of all, though, I want to see the mayor of the town; the mayor—marshal—buccaneer—bailiff—bumbailiff—or whatever you call your chief citizen. I was told that I would be likely to find him here."

"Judge Hucklebee, he must mean you; you're sheriff o' ther town," said Uncle Dan, as he rose to his feet again and glanced over to where sat a large, fat, bald-headed man, with a face as round and merry-looking as a stove-polish picture-sign on a board fence.

"If you'll stand up a moment, sir,

I'll quickly 'knock you down,'"

Mr. Hucklebee arose at once, and the postmaster continued:

"This man, sir, is Judge Hucklebee,

Whom we ez sheriff owns;

Judge Hucklebee, Cibuta John:

Whose maiden name is Jones."

With a flourish of his hand then, Uncle Dan again took his seat.

"I'm happy to know you, sir," said Cibuta John. "Allow me to ask whether you recognize these two gentlemen?" indicating his two prisoners.

"I think I do, sir, although they wear masks. Their figures are quite familiar to me. They are 'Giant' John Jones and Billy Bobsled—two of the worst characters of the town."

So Judge Hucklebee replied.

"I will now remove their masks," announced Cibuta John, "and then you can all identify them positively." And as he spoke he pulled the masks from the two villains' faces.

"Yes, they's the very men!" cried everybody in one voice.

"How's this, Giant?" asked Bill Twicker.

"You been a-tryin' ter pluck prickly-pars ag'in?"

"Hain't ye both old enough ter know that prickly-pars is sharp things to fool with?" Jem Patterson added. "Th' man what rubs a prickly-par th' wrong way, is bound ter git stuck, more or less, every time."

Both Giant John and Billy Bobsled glared around them in sullen defiance. Neither had a word to say.

"Now, sheriff," said Cibuta, "I'll lay the facts of the case before you."

"After eating my supper at the Dew-drop I lighted a cigar and started out for a stroll up the creek. When I reached a rocky place a short distance above the town, these two peach-blossoms sprung out upon me, each with a pop-gun in hand, and ordered me to stop."

"Naturally, I paused."

"Then I was informed that I must at once pack my gripsack and leave town. Yes, sir; actually told that I must 'git' right up and 'git.'"

"Now, what I naturally want to find out is this: Are these two blooming primroses authorized to dictate to a pilgrim in this way?"

"No, sir!" answered the sheriff, "they are not; nor any one else, so long as your said pilgrim does not run counter to our rules and regulations."

"Just what I thought, and somehow or other I changed places with these two lilies-of-the-valley. That is to say, I got the drop on *them* and *here* they are."

"And you desire to turn them over to me?" Judge Hucklebee asked.

"Well, that is what I *did* think of doing, sir; but if it will put you to any inconvenience, I will punish them myself. On second thought, perhaps that would be the better way. It will teach them a lesson they won't forget."

"How will you punish them?"

"Why, I'll take them right out in the street here, and whale the daylights out of them! *The*

more I think of it, the more it strikes me I'd ought to do it. What say you, gentlemen? Shall I take them both out and have a triangular hoe-down with them? or, turn them over to the sheriff?"

"You don't mean ter fight 'em both ter wunst, do ye?" Bill Twicker asked.

"Certainly I do. Why not?"

"Wal, it's a purty big job ter undertake, that's all."

Giant John and Billy Bobsled cast a glance at each other in a knowing way. They just ached for such a chance to get even with Cibuta. If they could get at him together, they would make him think there was an earthquake.

Giant John had had a taste of the Prickly Pear, 'tis true; but now, with Billy Bobsled to back him up, he felt that sweet revenge was at hand. Oh! he just panted for the fray!

"Well, which shall it be, gentlemen?" Cibuta again asked.

He knew well enough what the answer would be, ere he asked, for such crowds are always eager for excitement.

"The fight! The fight! Whale 'em! Give 'em prickly-pars till they can't rest!" and so forth, were the cries heard on every hand.

"So be it," assented Cibuta. "Some of you just go through their clothes and take away every weapon they carry while I surrender mine to some gentleman willing to hold them, and then we'll get down to real old business."

Bill Twicker and Jem Patterson performed that office, and took away every weapon the two bullies had about them, as far as they knew.

Cibuta John, in the mean time, had turned to Judge Hucklebee, and asked:

"Will you take charge of my revolvers and knife, sir?"

"Yes, with pleasure," the judge replied.

"Well, here they are, sir; two revolvers and a bowie; and— Oh! just take charge of this, too!" and he drew from his pocket the dagger that had come into his possession in so mysterious a manner, and held it out toward the judge.

The judge had accepted the revolvers and the bowie, and now put out his hand to take the dagger; but the moment he saw what it was he sprung back, his face assumed a deathly paleness, and he cried:

"My God! the silver dagger!"

Instantly every voice in the room was hushed. The place became as silent as the grave.

Cibuta John looked around him in utter bewilderment.

What could it mean?

He noticed that more faces than one had paled at mention of the silver dagger.

"Well," he presently said, "what is there about the silver dagger to paralyze you all like this?"

"My God! do you not know?" Judge Hucklebee cried.

"No; the dagger just came into my possession a short time ago."

"Read the inscription on its blade."

Cibuta John at once held the dagger up to the light, and there upon the blade, finely engraved, was the following legend:

"Though this be buried deep from sight,
Yet shall it come again to light;
And when again you see the brand,
Prepare! for death is near at hand!"

Cibuta John read it out aloud.

"Well!" he cried, "that takes the cake! I might say it gobbles up the whole lunch-basket, pie included! What does it mean?"

"It means just what it says, sir," answered Judge Hucklebee, solemnly.

"Pshaw! You don't take any stock in such nonsense, do you?"

"It is no nonsense, sir. We, too, scoffed at at first, but we have seen its work."

"Ah! Then the silver dagger has a history?"

"Yes."

"Will you repeat it to me? I would like to hear it. I am sorry to keep you waiting," turning to Giant John and Billy Bobsled, "but I am deeply interested in this matter. I will attend to you a little later on."

"Certainly, sir," said the judge, "if you care to hear the history of the silver dagger I will repeat it."

"About four years ago there came to this town a woman, a very strange woman. She was a gambler by trade, for a trade it is with some, and she opened here a gambling palace."

"It was a well-conducted place, and became very popular."

"One thing strange about the woman was, she always wore a mask. No one ever saw her face, until we saw it cold in death. Then it was found to be a very handsome one."

"Ah! she died here, then?"

"Yes; and by the silver dagger."

"Go on! Go on! I am deeply interested! I shall not interrupt again."

"Well, as I said, she opened a gambling-palace, and conducted it well. She was successful from the start."

"One night there entered her place a handsome, well-dressed stranger, at sight of whom the woman was heard to utter a low exclamation. Those who heard it knew that the stranger was no stranger to her."

"Presently the man sat down to play at the table over which she presided in person."

"From the very start, he lost. Luck was wholly against him, and at last he declared that he was broke."

"Then the woman sprung to her feet, drew this silver dagger from her bosom, and cried out:

"And now, you die! I am— And as she sprung upon him and plunged the dagger into his heart, she whispered her name to him."

"My God! You!" he cried, and then fell forward dead."

"The crowd started forward, but she drew a revolver and bade them stand back."

"Then she told her story."

"The man—she would not tell his name, nor hers—had wronged her, and she had sworn to kill him. She had kept her vow. She told her story at length, and when she concluded, she said:

"And now, nothing remains for me but— death. When I am dead, take this silver dagger and melt it. Do not let it longer exist. It is accursed!"

"As she uttered the last words, she raised the dagger and plunged it into her own breast."

"We buried them side by side, and no one knows who they were."

"The dagger was not melted."

"Strange to say, no one discovered the engraving on the blade until a year later, when it had done further bloody work."

"For a long time it disappeared; but one evening it came to light in one of our saloons, and the legend it bears was then first discovered."

"We laughed at the idea at first, but at last we learned that there is truth in it."

"That same evening a quarrel arose, and the silver dagger found a victim. It was buried to the hilt in the breast of one of the best young men of the town."

"After that it was buried, and none knew where, save him who did the work."

"Again for a long time it was not seen, and it came to be almost forgotten. No one ever expected to see it again."

"At last, however, once more it came to light."

"I scarcely need tell you how it sent a chill to our hearts to see it."

"There was at that time a pure and handsome girl living here. Her name need not be mentioned. She had many admirers, and two especially devoted lovers. Those two young men were deadly enemies."

"On the evening when this silver dagger came again to light, the young men mentioned met in this store, and had a violent quarrel."

"At last one drew a bowie-knife and sprung upon the other, who, being unarmed, snatched up the dagger as it lay near him on the counter, and with it met his rival in mortal combat."

"Their fight was a short one. In a few moments one threw up his arms and fell to the floor—dead. In his breast the silver dagger was buried."

"The killing in that instance was considered as done in self-defense, and the man went free. He afterward married the young lady, and they went East soon afterward."

"This dagger, accursed weapon that it is! was thrown into the creek. How it has come to light now, I do not know."

"You will now understand why we were horrified at seeing it again."

"Certain it is almost that it will find another victim."

"Who will it be?"

"I know not how it has come into your possession, young man; but if you take my advice you will put it beyond reach, and at once."

CHAPTER V.

A TERRIBLE FIGHT.

WHEN Judge Hucklebee finished his recital, no one spoke for several moments.

Cibuta John stood with the silver dagger lying across the palm of his hand, gazing at it in a state of abstraction.

How had the fatal brand come to him so mysteriously, after having been thrown into the creek?

He could not answer.

"Well," he presently said, "it is very mysterious, to say the least. Still, I am not afraid of its doing any mischief while it is in my possession."

"You had better let us melt it at once, as its original owner wished us to do," said the judge.

"No," Cibuta John replied, "I prefer to keep it."

"Very well, sir; but I fear you will repent it. Have you any objection to telling us how it came into your possession?"

"Certainly not. I will tell you all I can about it. While I was walking along up the creek a short while ago, as I told you, the dagger was thrown from somewhere, and fell directly in front of me in the path, sticking up in the sod. Where it came from, I do not know."

"Perhaps one o' these heur p'izin cusses throwed it at yer," remarked Jem Patterson, indicating Giant John and Billy Bobsled.

"No, I think not," returned Cibuta. "In fact, I am sure they did not."

"Wal, it's a mystery anyhow," decided Bill Twicker. "In ther first place, how did it git out o' ther crick?"

"Give it up!" Cibuta John responded. And he continued:

"But, this is not attending to business! These two tulips have claims upon my attention which cannot be longer deferred." And as he spoke, he waved his hand in the direction of his two prisoners. "Who will hold this dagger for me while I attend to them?"

No one said "I." Instead, all drew back. No one present would touch it.

"Well, you won't of course object to my laying it up on a shelf here until the fracas is over, will you?" he queried, addressing Bob Burdock, the proprietor of the store.

"Certainly not," Mr. Burdock replied.

Thereupon Cibuta John stepped behind the counter and put the dagger away, high up on one of the shelves.

"Now," he announced, as he stepped back and pulled off his coat, "we are ready to let slip the dogs of war."

"Here!" exclaimed Jem Patterson, "let me hold that for you." And he held out his hand for the coat.

Cibuta John tossed it to him.

No one observed a slip of paper that fell from one of its pockets as he did so, and which fluttered to the floor.

A few moments later that paper was picked up by Judge Hucklebee, whose face, as he glanced at it, grew red and white by turns.

"Now, my pippins!" Cibuta John cried, "we're ready! Some one please cut their bond and let them come!"

And he went out into the road and braced himself for the encounter.

The moon was now sailing high and bright and it was almost as light as day.

It was a most auspicious time for such a scene.

Presently, out came Giant John and his partner with a rush.

"Come right along, Giant," Cibuta called out. "Bring your Bobsled right here now, and we'll all take a ride. That's right! Put up your little hands, my cherubs, and wade right in!"

Just what the giant and his pard were preparing to do.

They began to dance and skirmish around, trying to find an opening to get in a blow.

It seemed an unequal contest.

Either of them was larger than Cibuta John, and it looked as if the latter would fare badly ere he was done with them.

If he was at all alarmed, though, he did not show it.

He was as cool as an iceberg.

"Come now!" he cried. "All hands around! Dotsy-do! Swing your partners!" And he, too, began to caper and antic around in imitation of the two bullies.

It was too ludicrous for anything.

The crowd fairly howled itself hoarse with laughter.

"Come! you pretty jumping-jacks!" Cibuta cried—"do come! There ain't but one of us, and you can't get at me on all sides at once; so cut right in anywhere. Ah! that's the ideal! Now you're beginning to warm up! Come again, my daisy! I'm right here where you left me—office-hours, from two to two G. M., and consultation free of charge!"

Seeing, as he supposed, an opening, Billy Bobsled had "cut in" as invited.

The next instant he was lying sprawled out on the flat of his back, seeing more stars than he had ever thought the firmament contained.

"Thar goes ther Bobsled!" some one shouted.

"Fetch up yer Bobsled, Giant," some one else called out, "an' take another ride!"

"Rah! fer Cibuter John!"

"Three cheers fer th' Prickly P'ar from Cactus Plains!"

"Whoop-ee! All hands around ther nine-pin!" etc., etc., were the cries heard on all sides.

"Come! my climbing arbutuses—my lambkins—my hunnysuckle-buds! Do come! You are not making things *half* lively enough!" Cibuta invited and proclaimed.

And, all the time, the two men pitted against him were "coming," to the very best of their ability; but the trouble seemed to be, they couldn't "git thar."

Around and around the hero of the hour they danced, trying to catch him foul if possible, and ducking and bowing and sparring and whooping yelling all the time.

But Cibuta was not the man to be caught foul. He had a very clever knack of coming around face to face with the right man at the right moment, that was truly wonderful.

Presently, over went the Giant.

"He, he, he! Haw, haw, haw! the crowd roared.

"Come, Bobsled!" cried Jem Patterson, "gather up yer pardner an' go in ag'in!"

"Prickly-p'ars is good eatin', if ye kin only 'cape ther prickles!" suggested Bill Twicker.

"Shell I send my dorg, Sancho, in ter help ye?"

"Come ter time, Giant!"

"Belt him one under the left lug, Bobsled!"

"Sally come up, Sally come down!"

"Whoop-ee! Bully for our side!"

All such cries, and a hundred or more others, were heard all around.

"Come, you fire-eaters! Why don't you come?" Cibuta John invited again. "I am getting tired of waiting for you. Come! you mean-looking, dog-faced, parrot-toed, sickly-looking sons of crawling bed-bugs, you! Do come! Ah! coming at last, eh? Well, here am I! Lively music, now, and all sashay!" And having his opponents in just the right position, he struck out suddenly and sent them both to grass at once.

"That's the idea!" he cried. "Now you're doing something! Now you're giving the audience their money's worth! Come, now! up again, my chirping bluebirds! Choose your partners, and form for a waltz-quadrille, with one of the 'quads' left out; call it a *trille* if you like, or any other kind of a dance! Hump yourselves now, my daffodils! All ready, now? Let her go, then! Whoop! Bow to the corners! Bow to your partners! Heads forward and back again! Forward again! Waltz your pardners! Back! Forward right and left! Back to your places! Well done, my whippoorwills! Now comes *our* turn! Sides forward! Back! Forward again! Waltz! Back! Forward right and left—Hello! Where are you? We are not *half* done yet!"

Truth was, both men were once more upon their backs on the ground.

With the words "right and left," Cibuta John's arms had shot out in that order, and down the bullies had dropped.

But they were up again in an instant.

Both were boiling over with rage, and both rushed in blindly.

Oh! but the crowd did whoop, and yell and cheer! They just enjoyed it immensely. Not only did they enjoy the fight in itself, but the outlandish exclamations of their hero tickled them highly.

And growing interesting it was, decidedly.

The two bullies pitched into Cibuta John for all they were worth.

Their eyes were fast closing, their noses were bleeding freely, and the blood, mingled with sand and dust, was smeared all over their faces.

In the moonlight they look like very demons, and like demons they rushed at their enemy.

"Come, my little darlings—my little cock sparrows, come!" Cibuta cried most tauntingly.

"Come right up, and we'll finish the measure! Now, then, forward fours! Back again! Forward and waltz corners! Oh! you *know* the figure, do you? Don't need any one to call off, eh? All right, my wild-eyed gazelles! Go right ahead! Right and left! All hands around! The other way! Whoopee! All sashay!"

For about two minutes then, as some one in the crowd remarked, "you couldn't tell t'other man from his neighbor."

"Go it, Cibuter!"

"Give 'em Hail Columbiar!"

"Ten to one on ther Prickly P'ar!"

"Give 'em some more chin!" etc., were the cries of the crowd.

Cibuta was too busy just then to talk, however.

He had his hands full.

Just about two minutes it lasted, and then—Well, Cibuta John stood there with his arms akimbo, while Giant John and Billy Bobsled lay at some distance away, once more upon their backs.

But with true bull-dog tenacity they sprung up again, dashed the blood from their eyes, and rushed at their enemy once more.

"Here you come again, eh?" cried Cibuta. "No time allowed for refreshments, eh? Well, my tri-colored rainbows, wade right in!"

And, "wade in" they did.

Cibuta John was forced to fight hard and furiously, which he did not hesitate to do. He sent in some telling blows, and, strange as it may seem, escaped being struck in the face himself.

He received several hard knocks upon his arms and shoulders, but his face bore not a single mark!

Again, for a minute or so, the battle raged furiously.

The result, however, was the same as before.

Once more the bullies were sent to earth.

Up they sprung again, once more dashing the blood away from their eyes, and then—But an awful cry arose.

"Look out, they have knives!"

It was true. Each of the cowards had drawn a knife from his boot, where it had been secretly hid, and with murderous intent they rushed upon their enemy together.

Revolvers were drawn, but no one dared to fire for fear of hitting the wrong man.

It was an awful moment.

"Oh! my God!" cried Judge Hucklebee, "he is doomed! It is the work of the silver dagger again!"

At the same moment a woman's piercing scream was heard, and a lovely girl of eighteen rushed forward and fell upon her knees.

It was Nettie Hucklebee, the judge's daughter.

"Oh! save him!" she cried. "Men of Anti-Bar, save him!"

"Oh! you cowards! You curs! Cibuta John had cried out at the first moment of alarm. And he prepared to meet the danger. As the men rushed upon him he sprang aside, and they missed him.

"Throw me a knife!" he cried.

Instantly a dozen were lying at his feet, but, ere he could stoop to pick one up, the villains were upon him again.

Again he dodged, barely escaping; and then, seeing a chance, he sprang quickly forward and dealt each of the cowards a blow in the face.

And terrible blows they were. They sounded like the loud cracking of a whip. And they did their work. Both men dropped back insensible, their faces almost crushed.

"Oh! Thank God, thank God!" cried the beautiful girl, and springing to her feet she bounded away from the scene.

The cheer that arose from the crowd, when they realized that their hero was the victor, was almost deafening.

A hundred men sprang forward at once to grasp Cibuta's hand.

As soon as he could, Cibuta John made his way into the store, where he sat down and asked for a drink of water. Something stronger was offered, but he declined it, and so the water was provided.

And as he sat and calmed his nerves, and regained his wind, those around him discussed the fight.

All agreed that it was truly a wonderful one, and that they had never seen its like before. And Uncle Dan Derrick, the poetic postmaster, remarked:

"This ain't th' sleepy town it war!"

"Sence kem this stranger from afar,—

"Cibuta John," th' 'Prickly P'ar'—

Thar's red-hot times at Ante-Bar!"

CHAPTER VI.

A GIRL'S CONFESSION.

JUDGE HUCKLEBEE did not return to the store after the fight was over, but started home at once.

He sent Cibuta John's revolvers and knife to him, however, and complimented him on his having come out victorious.

There was fire in the judge's eye.

He was in no pleasant frame of mind.

He walked with a rapid, nervous stride, and his lips were tightly compressed.

Something had disturbed the usual serenity of his nature.

No doubt the reader will readily guess what that something was.

It was the conduct of his daughter.

It will be remembered that he had picked up a slip of paper in Bob Burdock's store just previously to the street fight—a slip of paper that caused his face to turn red with anger.

It was the paper that had fallen from Cibuta John's pocket when he threw his coat to Jem Patterson for the latter to hold for him.

That, however, the judge did not know.

What he did know, though, the instant he glanced at the writing, was, that it had been written by none other than his daughter Nettie.

When he had read the note, he easily guessed the rest.

He entered the house in no gentle mood.

The first person he encountered was a servant.

"Where is my daughter?" he demanded.

"I think she is in her room, sir," the servant replied.

"Tell her to come to me at once!"

The woman hurried out to obey, wondering what could be in the wind to cause such a cloud of anger to hover over the judge's usually placid brow.

In a short time Miss Nettie came down, and entered into her father's presence.

She was about eighteen years of age, and of medium stature. Her figure was exquisitely proportioned and perfectly rounded, giving promise of magnificent womanhood. Her complexion of delicate red and white was marvelously clear; her hair was golden in color, and rich and lustrous, while her eyes were of a lovely deep velvety blue. She was truly a handsome girl.

"What is it, father?" she asked, half-timidly, her eyes seeking the floor.

"What is it, indeed!" the judge cried. "Well enough you know what it is! Why did you make such an exhibition of yourself a few minutes ago in the street?"

"Oh! forgive me, father!" the girl cried, as she advanced and sunk down upon her knees at his side, taking his hand in hers, "forgive your child! I was near the store when the fight began, and when I saw those cowards draw their knives, I was so frightened I scarcely knew what I was doing."

"So frightened that you had to rush forward, fall upon your knees, and cry out 'Oh! men of Ante-Bar, save him!' What is he to you?"

"When I saw his deadly peril, father, I could not help doing as I did. Will you not forgive me?"

"You were so frightened," the judge continued, "that when the danger was over you uttered a fervent 'Thank God!' Again I ask, what is this handsome adventurer to you?"

"What can he be to me, father? I never saw him before to-night."

"What can he be to you? He can be nothing to you—he *shall* be nothing to you!"

"Oh! father, I—"

"Stop! Listen to me! Nettie, my child, you have disgraced yourself—and me. Your name is upon every tongue in Ante-Bar at this moment. Every man is saying to his neighbor: 'Why did Judge Hucklebee's daughter do as she did? What is this stranger to her?' Nettie, again I ask you, what is he to you?"

"Father, how can you—how can you think he is anything to me?"

"Because, *this* leads me to think so!" the judge answered, and drawing the crumpled slip of paper from his pocket, he held it before his daughter's astonished eyes.

"Where did you get that?" the girl demanded, and snatching the paper from her father's hand, she sprang to her feet.

"Did you write it?"

"Yes. But, tell me, where did you get it?"

"Whom did you address it to?" the judge asked, not heeding his daughter's questions.

"Answer my question, father, and I will answer yours," retorted the young lady, spiritedly.

"Well, I found it."

"Where?"

"In the store. Think of the shame, Nettie. Suppose you had signed your name to it, and some one else had found it!"

"Oh! do give me the credit of having sound sense, father, at least!" the girl cried. "And now, to answer your questions. First, I *did* write it, father; and second, I addressed it to *no* one."

"Whom did you intend it for, then?"

"For—him."

"For Cibuta John?"

"Yes, father."

"It is as I thought."

"Listen, father. I heard those two men talking, and Giant John was making awful threats against Cibuta John. Then I thought I would warn Cibuta of his danger. I wrote the note, and then watched for him to come from the

Dew-drop Inn. When he came out he went up the creek. I hastened around by the path that leads to the hollow cottonwood tree, concealed myself in the tree, and when the man came along I threw the note out in front of him. He did not see me, nor does he know where the note came from. It must have surprised him not a little when the silver dagger fell before him in the path."

"The silver dagger?" the judge cried. "How came you by the silver dagger?"

"I bought it to-day of some boys who found it while bathing in the creek."

"And do you know its history?"

"No, father."

"Why did you throw that to Cibuta John?"

"I tied this note to its handle, and used it to carry the note swiftly and straight to where I wished it to go."

"And, still you tell me you have no interest in this bold adventurer—"

"I have not said so, father."

"Ah! then you acknowledge that you have, eh?"

The girl made no reply.

"Nettie," said the judge, "listen to me: In this matter you have acted so strangely unlike your usual self, that I know some secret is at the bottom of it. Now, I demand to know what it is!"

The girl raised her head, and her eyes flashed as though she were about to make some angry reply. Instead, however, she again sunk down at her father's side and cried:

"Oh! father, I cannot rule my heart. I love him!"

To say that Judge Hucklebee was surprised at the confession, would but ill express the old gentleman's feelings. It was a revelation he had little expected.

"How could it be possible?" he asked himself.

"How could it be that his child could be in love with this stranger who had been but scarce four hours in the town?"

A solution to the problem suggested itself.

Up to within a year or so of the time of which we write, Nettie Hucklebee had been away at school, and the thought which struck the judge was this:

"She must have met him while at school."

Immediately then, however, he recalled the fact that she had said she had never seen him before this night, and knew that Nettie never spoke aught but the truth.

It was something he could not understand.

When he could speak at all, he said:

"Nettie, you say you never saw this man before to-night?"

"Yes, father, I never saw him in my life before."

"And still you say you love him?"

"Yes."

"How can it be?"

"I do not know. As I said, I cannot rule my heart."

"It is strange, very strange. Have you ever spoken to him?"

"No, sir, never!"

"I cannot understand how it can be. You say you have never before seen him, have never spoken to him, and— Ah! have you ever heard of him before?"

The girl did not reply.

"Nettie," said the judge, kindly, "I am your father, and you are my child. Than I, you have no better friend in all the world. I would do nothing but for your good. Can you not confide in me? Now, I demand to know the whole truth of this matter, from first to last."

The girl was now weeping.

Her father's kind words had more weight with her than his harsh ones.

"Forgive me, father," she sobbed. "I will tell you all."

"Pray do so, my child. You may trust me fully."

The girl began:

"You know Mother Wolf, father—"

"The old witch of the mountains!—yes, curse her! What nonsense had she been telling you?"

"She once told me my fortune."

"Bah! School-girl folly! But go on and let me hear it all."

"One day early last summer, shortly after I came here from school, I was out upon the mountain, when a shower came up and I sought shelter in Mother Wolf's cabin. While I was there she offered to tell my fortune and I allowed her to do so. She filled a small tub with water, performed a sort of incantation over and around it, and then told me to prick my finger and allow one drop of my blood to drop into it."

"Pshaw! Such folly!"

"I did so. Then Mother Wolf stirred the

water, repeated some mysterious words as she did so, and then darkened the cabin. I was frightened. Outside the storm was raging furiously. The loud thunder was rolling and crashing incessantly. Within all was black as midnight. I begged the old witch to let me go, but she laughed at my fears and assured me that I was safe.

"Presently she bade me look into the tub. I did so, and saw that the water it contained was growing luminous. It became brighter and brighter, until at length it glowed with a strange, phosphorescent-like light that partly illumed the whole cabin."

"Then Mother Wolf again performed her incantations, and there in the tub I plainly saw—"

"What?"

"I saw the likeness of a man."

"Whose likeness was it?"

"Then I did not know. It was the likeness of a handsome man, one seemingly a Mexican. He was of medium height, his complexion was dark, he wore a mustache, and his hair was so long it rested upon his shoulders."

"Cibuta John!"

"Yes, his likeness it was."

"But what did it portend—what did the old witch prophesy?"

"She said that one day he whose likeness it was would become my—my husband."

"A thousand furies! And did you believe such nonsense?"

"No, father, I did not."

"Why, then, your interest in the man?"

"I will tell you. I did not believe in the old witch's charm, but I could not forget the picture I had seen. It has been constantly before me, day and night, ever since. I tried to forget it, but I could not. The handsome face and the bold, black eyes, found place in my heart, and I could not dislodge them. I found that I could not shake off the spell, and at last I would not have done so if I could. I knew that the feeling I possessed for the man whom I had seen in shadow only, was love; and though I might never see him, love him I ever would."

"When this Cibuta John came to town this evening in the stage-coach, I recognized him at once, and— But, you must forgive me, father; for in this matter I cannot rule my heart. Now, father, you have heard the truth, and you know my secret."

Judge Hucklebee was sorely troubled;—he hardly knew what to do in the matter.

He realized that he would have to move very carefully, and do nothing to incite his daughter to defy his authority, for well he knew where love rules, all other thoughts and acts become subservient to that passion.

For some moments he was silent, and then he said:

"Nettie, you love your father?"

A pair of arms instantly thrown around his neck, and a kiss pressed upon his cheek, were his answer.

"And you will obey me in all things, knowing that I will ask nothing of you that is not for your own good and welfare?"

"I shall strive always to obey you, father."

"Pay attention, then, to what I have to say."

"Your feeling for this strange man is not love—it is merely infatuation. In time it will have passed away, and you will then see its folly."

"Never! father, never!"

"Tut—tut! I am older than you, my child, and know more of the world and its ways, and of human nature and its weaknesses;—and—"

"But you have not a woman's heart in your breast, father, and you cannot understand mine."

"I can, and do, understand your heart, Nettie; far better than you can understand it yourself, at your age. I deeply regret, too, that your dear mother is not living to advise and guide you in this matter. You could not then bring such an argument to bear against the reasoning of an older head."

"In most of cases, Nettie, you have proved yourself a very sensible girl; I hope you will prove the same in this instance. Now, listen to reason. We know nothing about this handsome and daring stranger; we know not what he is, who he is, nor anything else. Who can say that he is not a vile, bad man?—a thief, or even worse?"

"Father!"

"It may all be true of him, my child, and I must caution—nay, I must forbid your making his acquaintance."

"Such caution is not necessary, father. I have no intention of making his acquaintance. I told my secret to you because you command-

ed me to tell you all; but my secret it shall still remain. I believe this Cibuta John to be an honest man, but I shall not put myself in his way. He shall never know my heart's secret, nor one word of what I have told you. Pray do not be angry with me, father, nor imagine that I shall forget the respect that is due you, or that I will knowingly or willingly do anything to displease you."

"My daughter, I believe you!" the judge exclaimed; and drawing her to him, he embraced her. "You may now go."

"I thank you for your kindness to me, father," the girl said, as she rose to go. "I will never attempt to deceive you again. Good-night."

"Good-night."

When his daughter was gone, Judge Hucklebee paced the floor in no easy state of mind.

In his heart he cursed the old witch of the mountain, while at the same time he wondered at her art.

"She must be in league with the devil!" he finally exclaimed.

One thing he decided upon. If this man, Cibuta John, intended to remain at Ante-Bar, he and his daughter would go.

Little he imagined what Fate had in store for him.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER LEGEND.

IN the mean time "Giant" John Jones and Billy Bobsled had been picked up, still insensible, and taken to the lock-up, where they were incarcerated.

The citizens of Ante-Bar were exceedingly exasperated at their treachery in drawing their concealed knives during the fight, and Judge Hucklebee had promised to deal with them summarily next day.

As he had told Cibuta John, they were two of the worst characters in the town.

The law-abiding citizens had heretofore dealt too leniently with them, and had put up with their insolence and abuse in no small degree, for the sake of peace; but now the last straws had been laid on.

The fact that they had waylaid a sojourner as they had, and with their faces masked, too, was of itself enough to cause their expulsion from the town; and added to that misdemeanor, was this latter act of treachery.

It was decreed that they must go.

"You're right, Poet!" exclaimed Jem Patterson, in response to the postmaster's remark in rhyme. "Things is red-hot heur ter-night, for a fact!"

"It war too bad," Bill Twicker declared, "that them 'ar p'izen cusses hed knives hid in ther boots. Ef Jem an' me hed once surspected it, we'd 'a' had 'em out o' thar, you bet!"

"It was a close call for me," said Cibuta John. "If they had pulled their knives on me a little earlier in the fight, when they were in fresher condition, they would have made it hot for me. Had I suspected such treachery, I would have struck harder blows. Something like the last ones I gave them."

"Yes; them last blows did ther biz!"

"You may talk about the treachery of the red-skin Indian," Cibuta continued, "and you may talk about the treachery of the yellow-skin Mexican; but no kind of perfidy is so purely cussed and mean as the treachery of the white man. It crops out when you least expect it."

"That's about whar you're right!" Bill admitted. "When a white man is bad— Wal, he is bad; that's all!"

"By the way," said Cibuta, "who is the young lady who was so excited by the fight?"

"Ther one that fell upon her knees out thar?"

"Yes."

"Why, she are Nettie Hucklebee, ther daughter of Judge Hucklebee. She's as fine a gal as ever lived, too."

"She's the old judge's daughter, eh?"

"Yes; an' mighty proud he is of her. Ther gal has got no mother, an' ther judge fairly dotes on her. She keeps house fer him."

"Where does the judge reside?"

"Did ye notice ther white house jest this side o' ther Dew-drop Inn?"

"Yes, I think I did."

"That's th' place."

"I ruther thought that you must know ther judge's gal," Jem Patterson here remarked.

"Why?" Cibuta John asked.

"'Cause, th' way she kem out an' howled fer us ter save ye."

"No, I never saw her before in my life," Cibuta declared.

"Wal, it's queer. She ain't ther sort o' gal

ter cut up that way fer nothin'; not by a long sight."

"What I tell you, is true," Cibuta John insisted. "I never saw her before."

"Oh! don't think I doubt yer word!" Jem exclaimed. "I mean it's queer why she—why—"

"Why she should be interested in me then, eh? That's what you would say?"

"Wal, yes; er somethin' ter that effect."

"Well, I am sure I do not know. Perhaps she was watching the fight, and when she saw my danger she became so excited she did not know what she did. Women do strange things sometimes, you know."

So Cibuta John spoke, but it was not what he believed. He believed there was something back of it all which did not appear upon the surface. He now had an idea where the silver dagger, with its mysterious note attached, had come from.

"Yes, that may be it," Jem admitted. "Ez you say, wimmin is queer critters. Some wimmin kin kill a b'ar; but jest let a poor little skart-ter-death mouse show itself, an'—Wal, they're done fer! There's my wife, Sally Ann, fer instance. If any one kin explain why she will dodge inter a closet, an' stand thar fer two mortal hours in th' heat, wi' th' sweat a-pourin' out all over her, an' all jest because she's seen a flash o' lightnin', er heard a clap o' thunder, I'd like ter know it. She don't know, that's sure; an' if I ax her she gits mad. Does she think that ar' same flash is a-cavortin' round yet, after it's come an' bin an' gone, lookin' jest 'specially fer her? Ez you said, pard, wimmin is queer."

"She ain't afeerd o' you, though, be she Jem?" Bill Twicker asked.

"Afeerd o' me! Yas, jest about ez much ez I'm afeerd o' your dorg Sancho, thar."

Truth was, when Jem and Sally Ann had been made one, Sally Ann had at once assumed the responsibility of *being that one*. She still held the position.

"Well," Cibuta John presently announced, "I guess I will go up to the Dew-drop, and turn in for the night." And he rose to go.

"Hold on, pard," said Bob Burdock, the storekeeper, "don't go off an' fergit this heur silver dagger. I don't want th' cussed thing around heur."

"Oh! yes, I had forgotten it." And Cibuta went to the shelf and took the dagger down, thrusting it into his pocket.

"Well, good-night, friend!" he said, and went out; a hearty "good-night" following him from every man in the store.

He went at once to the Dew-drop Inn, and retired to his room.

There, as he recalled the events of the evening, he once more examined the silver dagger.

"Strange stories they tell of you," he said half-aloud addressing it. And once more he read the legend it bore. "The stories are true, I do not doubt; but is it fate? or mere chance?"

As he turned the mysterious weapon over and over, he presently thought he detected more engraving near its edge.

If engraving it was, it was so fine as to defy the naked eye to read it. Besides, it seemed to be partly worn away in places.

Cibuta John had a small magnifying-glass, and taking it from his pocket he placed the dagger under it.

Instantly he was enabled to read:

"When five have fallen by this brand—
And five most surely will
Unless it be too soon destroyed—
'Twill work no further ill."

"Well, this is a mystery," Cibuta mused, as he sat and stared at the dagger. "Let me see: Four are known to have fallen by it since it came to this place. Is there still one more to follow? or, did it find a victim previously to its advent here?"

"As the gambler queen said, it is truly accursed."

"Now, what am I to do with it? Shall I fear the legends it bears, and throw it away? No, never! I will keep it!"

"What it has done in the past has been the result of mere chance; and, even though there be some truth in the legends, I do not know but that the fated five have met their doom."

"If so, and this last poetic effusion is to be relied on, the silver dagger's work is done."

"I wonder how it came to me? Was it Judge Hucklebee's daughter who threw it? If so, I wonder where she was at the time? I could see no one around. I must find out. A fine-looking girl is Miss Hucklebee, to judge by the glimpse I had of her. I wonder if I shall make her acquaintance?"

"Well, silver dagger, you are something of a

mystery; but, keep you I will." And thrusting the dagger into his pocket, he put out his light and retired to bed for the night.

Like Judge Hucklebee, little he knew of what was in store for him.

When morning came, with it came the recollection to the people of Ante-Bar that two prisoners were in the lock-up awaiting sentence.

"Trial," think you, would be a more fitting word? Not so. No trial was deemed necessary. The proof of guilt was too evident and conclusive.

Nevertheless, Judge Hucklebee opened court in due form.

Judge Hucklebee was only a sheriff, 'tis true; but to be the sheriff of the town of Ante-Bar, was to be its governor. In truth, the latter would have been a far more fitting title.

Court, by the way, was held in the post-office.

When Judge Hucklebee had taken his seat, and the prisoners were arraigned before him, he said:

"Acting in my official capacity as Sheriff of this town of Ante-Bar, prisoners at the bar, it becomes my duty this morning to pass sentence upon you for two several offenses."

"The first is this: Last night, you, with masks over your faces, did waylay and threaten a gentleman who had come here to sojourn for a time in our midst. You threatened his life."

"For that offense you both merit permanent expulsion from this town."

"The second offense is as follows: After your arrest for the crime aforesaid, you were given the alternative of fighting your captor, or taking your punishment at our hands. You chose the former. In that fight, like the cowards at heart that you are, you drew knives and attempted to murder your opponent."

"You are guilty of both charges."

"Now, therefore, inasmuch as you have partly suffered punishment for the first offense, the Court decides as follows: That the said first offense be thrown out, and that sentence be passed upon you for the second offense only. Have you anything to say as to why you should not now receive the sentence of the Court?"

Judge Hucklebee's address was in some respects a remarkable one.

"Ef I may now be premitted ter yawp my yawp," said "Giant" John Jones, "I reckon as I hev some remarks ter make. Ter begin with, this heur are a queer old trial anyhow! Nothin' hez bin proved. Who makes ther first charge ag'in us? That 'ar black-an'-tan Mexican half-breed thar?" pointing to Cibuta John. "Him? Wal, kin he prove it? Proof is what we want heur, an' no one-man's story biz! Kin he prove what he sez? Ef he can't, then—"

Here "the Court" stopped him.

"Please bear in mind," he said, "that the first charge has been thrown out."

"Oh! oh! Bin throwed out, eh? Oh! 'skuse me! Wal, then, what is ther other one? Who sez we used knives, eh? Jest trot out ther man w'at sez so, an—"

Again he was cut off.

"Perhaps," said "the Court," "your friend, Mr. Bobsled, would like to make a few remarks. Your own do not seem to keep to the point. Mr. Bobsled, have you anything to offer?"

Mr. Bobsled had not; he was the silent partner.

"Then," said the judge, "the sentence of this Court is, that you both be conducted five miles away from this town, turned face to the east, and set free, never more to be allowed to return. And may God have mercy upon your souls."

The judge then appointed the guard who were to do the "conducting," and closed the case by saying:

"Mr. Jones, you may now take your Bobsled and 'slide.'"

The guardsmen understood what was required of them. They procured two strong poles, put one prisoner astride of each, tied his feet, and then lifting the poles to their shoulders, marched out of town, half the population of the place following them.

It was what is called "riding on a rail."

As they were lifted up to the shoulders of those who carried them, Giant John turned to Judge Hucklebee and Cibuta John, and cried:

"Cusses on ye both! 'I'll fix ye, er my name ain't Giant John!" And he continued to curse and threaten as long as he could be heard.

The town congratulated itself that they were gone.

Later in the day Cibuta John, who had that morning bought a horse, mounted his animal and rode away to the south.

Where to?

CHAPTER VIII.

A DARING DEED.

LATE in the afternoon of the same day, the Ante-Bar stage-coach was rolling northward along the same road which Cibuta John had set out upon in the opposite direction about an hour earlier.

This coach carried the mail, and was drawn by four fine horses.

It carried also some six or eight passengers, some of whom we must here introduce.

On the box beside the driver sat one Gerald Keyne. He was a fine-looking man, perhaps thirty years of age. He was tall and dark, and sported a charming mustache. There was about him however, a certain something that bespoke, to the practiced eye, the gentleman "sharper." Such he was.

Upon the top of the coach were three men, evidently miners.

Inside, the first to be mentioned, was a young and handsome woman. This lady was Clara St. Clare, on her way to Ante-Bar to become the "schoolmarm" of the new school. She was about twenty-four years of age, though she did not look to be more than twenty. She was a decided brunette. Her luxuriant hair was a very dark brown in color, and her eyes, as black as jet, were as bright and flashing as diamonds. She was truly beautiful, both of face and of form.

Beside her, on the same seat, sat an old negro. His name, or rather the only one he knew, was Snowball White. A blacker "nigger" than he, never lived. He was so black, that one might have supposed charcoal would make a white mark on him. He had been born and reared as a slave. He was to Clara St. Clare a servant, companion, body-guard and protector in one.

The lady's father had once been a slave-owner, and Snowball White his best, most faithful, and most trustworthy slave. When freedom had been declared, Snowball absolutely refused to accept his. He preferred to remain as he was.

He was now traveling with his young mistress in the capacity named.

The next to be mentioned, was a little, dried-up-looking man, who rejoiced in the name of Phineas Skynn. Mr. Skynn was a lawyer—at least he claimed to be.

The other passenger was an old Jew.

The lady was reading, the old ducky was dozing, the lawyer was sleeping soundly, and the old Jew sat with his hands crossed over the head of a heavy cane, evidently lost in thought.

Outside, the men on top were enjoying a game of "penny-ante," while Gerald Keyne and the driver were having a quiet talk and smoke together.

And the stage, as stated, was rolling along. Its speed was neither fast nor slow, but a happy medium gait between the two.

Presently, as it rounded an abrupt bend in the road, a startling sight met the driver's gaze.

"Whoop! Hol' up!" he cried, putting on the brake with his foot, and pulling back hard upon the reins. "Whoop! you critters! Heur's a toll-gate!" And in a moment, the stage was at a stand.

Just ahead, in the middle of the road, was a most remarkable-looking being.

It was presumably a man; but if so, he was most unbecomingly attired.

He was dressed in a green and red striped Mother Hubbard gown, had an old-fashioned sun-bonnet of the same material on his head, and over his face wore a mask. In each hand was a revolver at full-cock, both leveled straight at the driver's head.

The moment the stage came to a stand, this strange individual cried out:

"Ah! there, my size—ez near ef I kin judge! I'll—not steal you, but I'll drill ye ez full o' holes ez a culinary skimmer, unless ye put up yer little paws an' be ez meek ez lambs! Ah! That's right! It does my heart good ter meet a driver like you! You know your biz, you do! You know jest what's required! Why, a wink is jest ez good ez a nod, ter you, every bit. I'm 'most tickled ter death ter make yer acquaintance! An' yer passengers, too! All so sensible an' obligin'! I can't begin ter tell ye how proud I am. Really, gentlemen, ye must 'a' bin thar before, every one o' ye; you're so well posted. All I had ter do war ter stand heur in the road, wi' my batteries exposed, an' ye stopped 'thout my sayin' a word. Now, ef ye'll keep yer han's right up, thar won't be a drap o' blood shed. Ef not— But, pshaw! I may ez well keep still! I kin see at a glance that ye know jest what's required, so I'll say no more about that. It might do ter mention that six good rifles are a-lookin' at ye though, each one on 'em ready ter puke up a chunk o' lead ez

big ez your thumb; so, be *very* careful ter keep yer han's well up. Ef ye doubt my story, bein' ez ye can't see ther rifles mentioned, jest put one han' down fer th' fraction o' a second—th' sixteenth part o' a split red ha'r o' time, an' ye'll be wafted inter port across th' big divide afore ye kin say 'Rob Jackson,' er any other man. Th' rifles aforesaid are a-lookin' at ye, like real old grim Death. Don't let *that* escape yer mind fer a moment!

"Come, now! Git right down an' out o' thar, every one o' ye, maskeline an' femernine alike!"

The moment the stage had stopped, all within it was confusion. Outside, the cause being plainly seen and understood, the men had raised their hands at once, and each remained quiet.

"Oh! what can the trouble be?" cried the lady, as she closed her book quickly.

"Wh—what's matter? What's up?" queried Phineas Skynn, the lawyer, as he awoke suddenly from his sleep. "Are we there?"

"Moly Hoses!" cried the old Jew. "Can it be a robber?"

The old ducky said nothing, but prepared to defend his young mistress against anything that might come to pass.

Then came the words of the road-agent, as given.

"Oh! mine goodness!" cried the old Jew, "it is a robber!" And he drew a well-filled wallet from his pocket and slipped it into his boot.

"Wh—what do you say?" gasped the lawyer.

"A robber, mine frient; a robber! Petter as you blace your bocket-pook in your poot, same as me!"

"A—a—robber? oh! heavens!" And with trembling hands the lawyer followed the Jew's advice.

"Oh!" the lady cried, "do you think we will be robbed, sir?"

"My tear lady," the Jew answered, "I tink ve vill. Petter you vas blace *your* valuables in your—your—"

"I don't wear boots," the lady said quickly, to help the old man out.

"Vell, t'en, I vill allow you to blace your monish in *my* poots."

"No, I will try and defend it myself. Oh! he orders us to get out! Shall we?"

"Pet your schweet life I will," the Jew cried, "and mighty gwick!" And he tumbled out with haste.

The lawyer followed at once.

"Come!" cried he in the Mother Hubbard gown. "Everybody out! I don't want ter delay ye any longer than necessary. Git right out, every one of ye!"

"Come, Snowball," said Clara St. Clare, "we must obey." And she stepped out.

"Ah! a lady! pardon me, madam. I will put you to as little inconvenience as possible. Ah! a nigger, too!" as Snowball clambered out. "Hullo! Snowball, how are ye?"

"For de lub ob goodness, now yo' know my name?" the old ducky cried. And then as he saw the threatening revolvers, he jumped in front of his mistress, and shouted:

"Look out dar, ol' woman, whar yo' is a-p'intin' dem ar guns! Hain't yo' got no sense? Look out, I say! Turn 'em some other way! Dey will go off de fu'st yo' know, an' den some one will get hurted, *shua!*"

"Don't be uneasy, Snowball. Jest you hold up yer han's, an' ye won't git hurt."

"How yo' come ter know my name?" the ducky asked again.

"Why, I guessed it. Any feller o' *your* shade o' color is 'titled ter a white name, seein' ez it's th' only way ye've got ter indulge in sich a shade of purity."

"Come, Jew, git up! Don't get down thar in ther dust an' s'ile yer breeches."

The old Jew had fallen upon his knees and was begging heartily to be spared.

"Now," the robber continued, "form in line heur, an' I'll call ye up ter me one at a time. That's right, only jest turn about an' face t'other way. Thar! Now, stan' jest ez still ez ye kin, an' don't budge. Remember ther rifles are a-p'intin' at ye from this heur clump o' bushes, an' if one o' ye moves down he'll go! Keep 'em covered, boys!" addressing his men in the ambush as though they really were there, instead of being mere bugbears of his imagination, invented for the occasion; "an' if one on 'em turns his face this way ter see what is goin' on behind 'em shoot him!—an' shoot ter kill!"

There they all stood in a row, with faces turned toward the long stretch of road over which they had come, and behind them, at some distance away, stood the man in the Mother Hubbard gown, laughing heartily but silently as he watched the trembling legs of the lawyer and the old Jew.

When he had enjoyed himself for a few moments, he said:

"Now, Jew, come here!"

With a groan, and with face as white as it could turn, considering its natural yellow hue, he obeyed.

"So help me—" he began, but the robber bade him shut up.

"Come, fork over you wealth. Don't try to hold any back. Lively! Snake off them 'ar boots first! I have an idee thar's spondulix in them."

With many groans, and all the while pleading in a whining tone, the Jew obeyed. He could not well have done otherwise.

"Now, git back ter yer place," the road-agent ordered, when he felt satisfied that the Jew had given up his all. "Hold on, though," he added, "what is your name?"

"Levi Poppenheimer," the Jew answered.

The agent made a note of it in a little book.

"That's all," he then said. "Git ter yer place!" And he added:

"Now, you preacher cuss, er lawyer, er whatever ye be, *you* come up an' disgorge!"

Mr. Skynn quickly came up.

"Off wi' them 'ar boots!" was the order. "No doubt you follered the old Jew's example, er else he follered yours. Off with them!"

It could not be helped, and the lawyer surrendered his wealth.

"Now, your name?"

"Phineas Skynn."

"Skynn, eh?" said the robber, as he noted it down. "Skynn by name and a 'skin' by nature, perhaps. Well, Mr. Skynn, you have been 'skinned' this time, sure. Git back ter yer place."

With a sorrowful heart the lawyer went back.

The next one called was Gerald Keyne.

Him the highwayman searched himself, and the first thing he found was—in the right-hand-side pocket of his loose jacket—a small self-cocking derring.

"Ah!" he cried, "I suspected it! If I had allowed you to put your hand in thar, no doubt you'd 'a' taken th' risk an' plugged me. Now, ante up! If thar's anything I've missed, jest preduce it!"

This man's name was asked too, but refused.

"Tell me yer name, er *die!*" cried the robber, as he thrust his revolvers squarely under the man's nose.

The name was given.

And so it went on until all had been called save the lady and her negro servant.

These the road-agent called up together.

"Now, fair lady," said the agent, "I must trouble you. And *you*, nigger, you pony right up; er die right down!"

Even as he spoke, though, he raised his finger and warned the lady not to speak. Then in a very low tone he said something to her which caused her to start, and for a brief instant he raised his mask.

Instantly the lady grasped his hand.

Then he hurriedly explained something to her, to which she nodded yes, and smiled.

"Come, nig! Don't be all day!" this mysterious robber then cried aloud. And he added:

"You other fellers, thar, you jist stand still, an' keep yer han's up ez straight ez ye kin. It's kinder rough on ye, I know; but I'll soon be done. Come, lady, be ez quick ez ye kin. An' *you*, nigger, you jist hump yourself! You're too blamed slow ter drive pigs!"

While the wearer of the Mother Hubbard was thus exhorting, however, the lady was leading her servant rapidly away up the road.

For a short distance they proceeded, and then they turned suddenly from the road and disappeared.

"Look out, Jew!" the bold agent continued. "Keep your han's well up! Come, nigger, *come!* Snatch off that 'ar other boot! Now, lady, your earrings, please. Boys, keep your eyes upon ther driver an' Mr. Keyne, especially. Ef they turn the'r heads, *fire!*"

Then all was silence. And the silence continued. Nor was it again broken. In truth, the daring road-agent had hurried silently away from the scene.

CHAPTER IX.

A RED-HOT SCENE.

ONE—two minutes passed away, and still the weary travelers stood there in a row.

Phineas Skynn, the lawyer, was perspiring from every pore. His jaw was hanging, and his tired arms were bound to come down, despite his resolute efforts to keep them up.

Levi Poppenheimer, the old Jew, was in no better condition. If anything, he suffered the

worst of all, for his legs were growing weak at the knees. He could hardly stand.

All the others suffered more or less, and the hot sun beaming upon them as it neared its setting, caused their perspiration to flow freely.

It was nothing short of torture, but thus far not one had dared to move.

What puzzled them was the profound stillness that had suddenly fallen over the scene.

Not a sound could be heard save the champ-ing and pawing of the horses, and an occasional rattle of the harness.

"Great thunder an' minute-guns!" the driver exclaimed at last. "How much longer?"

No reply.

Gerald Keyne ventured to turn his head a little.

Finding that he was not instantly killed, nor even challenged, he was encouraged to turn it a little more.

Then he turned clear around.

"Well, by the infernal!" he cried, as he dropped his arms, "the cuss is gone!"

What a sigh of relief went up from that crowd!

"But," Keyne added, "where's the lady and the nigger?"

They all looked at one another in blank surprise.

What could it mean?

The driver was the first to catch on to the spirit of the thing in its ridiculous light.

"Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha!" he burst out.

"Oh! Don't we look sick and silly? All of us! Every one of us! I include myself, too! Ho, ho, ho! Ya-a-h!" And he hugged himself and laughed long and uproariously.

"It seems to be very funny for you, mine frient," said the old Jew.

"Funny! Lord bless your soul! what else was it? The idee o' us a-standin' heur a-boldin' up our han's, all in a row, fairly quakin' in our boots, an' nobody around ter *make* us do it!"

And again he roared.

Some of the others laughed with him, they could not help it; but neither the lawyer, the Jew nor Gerald Keyne could force a smile.

The lawyer and the Jew had lost their all, and that, to them, was heartrending; while Keyne was concerned about Clara St. Clare.

"I would give a fortune," he cried, as he drew a revolver and glared around, "if that man would come back! I could now meet him on an equal footing. I wonder which way they went? There must have been at least a dozen of them, to get away with both the lady and her servant without making a sound. Come! Spread out, men! Let's rescue that lady or die!"

"Mighty brave all to wunst!" the driver remarked to some of the others, aside. "Come, though, an' we'll see what we kin find out."

Half an hour they spent; and learned to their satisfaction and chagrin that the man in the Mother Hubbard gown had been entirely alone. They found his gown and hood a short distance away from the road, but they could not follow the trail. The ground was rocky, and none of them were expert at trailing.

It was a mystery.

They had to give it up. So, getting aboard the stage again, they continued on their way.

Barely two miles further had they traveled, when out into the road ahead of them rode four masked men, each one bearing a repeating rifle.

"Stop! and throw up your hands!" came the ringing order.

And it was obeyed.

"Great guns!" cried the driver. "Things is lively on this heur trail ter-day, er I'm a royal liar!"

"Get down and come out!" was the next order, and it, too, was quickly obeyed.

As soon as they were on the ground, with "hands up," one of the masked men dismounted and prepared to search them.

The Jew happened to be the first.

"Say, old Israel, whar is yer wealth?" the man cried, after he had examined almost every pocket the Jew's clothes contained.

"Mine frient," the Jew replied, "it ish gone; you vas chust a leetle too late."

"What d'ye mean?"

"I means some other feller vas been got ahead mit you. Ve haf been already robbed."

"Git out! you're joking!" And the man glanced at the others.

"No choke at all, mine frient."

"Solemn truth, sure's ye'r born!" declared the driver.

"By heavens! I don't believe it!" cried the leader of the band. "Search them, every one. If you don't get it then, search the coach."

His order was obeyed. Every man was searched, but nothing of value was found.

Then attention was turned to the stage. That, too, was turned almost inside out, but the result was the same.

To use a Westernism—there was some tall swearing done.

"Where were you stopped?" the leader asked.

"Bout two miles back," the driver replied.

"How many agents tackled you?"

"Only one."

"Only one? Thunder!"

"Jest prezackly."

"I don't believe it. You are trying some cute game with me."

"Wal, ye're welcome ter search us ag'in, ef ye like."

That was useless.

"Well, we'll give you up this time," said the leader of the band. "If it is a trick, it is a mighty good one, and you deserve to go free. Get in, and go ahead."

The travelers obeyed, and the stage was soon on its way again, making good speed toward Ante-Bar.

"Wal, ef this heur trip don't beat all!" the driver broke out, as they were rolling along. "Two stops within an hour! It beats anything that I ever heard happen afore, an' I've met quite a few gentlemen o' th' road in my time, too! Lordy! what a figger that feller did cut in this heur gown!"

"It is certainly a mystery," said Gerald Keyne. "I cannot understand how he could spirit away that lady and her negro servant with no help. I thought he must have ten or a dozen men at least! It puzzles me completely."

"Give it up!" said the driver. "He did it, that are sure."

"Wal, let's have a little fun ourselves, now," said one of the men who rode on top, "seein' ez ther cussed agents hez had theirs! Jest hand that 'ar gown an' bonnet over heur, an' I'll put 'em on an' go ter town in 'em!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" one of his companions laughed. "That would be fun, Jim; but I'll bet two dollars you ain't got ther cheek ter do it!"

"Whar'll ye git two dollars?" asked he called "Jim."

"Wal, that's so; but I'll bet my hat ag'in' your boots, anyhow!"

"Done!" cried the other. "I don't 'low no man ter dare me wi' a bet! Hand over ther gown, an' on it goes!"

The driver handed the striped gown and the bonnet over to him, and the fellow put them on.

He was as homely a man as ever lived. His hair was red and long, his skin was red and patched with great freckle-blotches, and his eyes were of a color best defined as bottle-green. His nose was long, and his mouth was one broad slit, almost from ear to ear.

The moment he was attired in the peculiar garb, every one who could see him laughed heartily. They could not help it. As the driver said, it was enough to make a sick dog laugh.

"Oh! Ain't I a beauty!" the man exclaimed. "Ain't I a darling! Oh! My! Don't some one want ter kiss me?" And he smiled and nodded around upon them all, causing a fresh burst of laughter.

The man's face happened to be clean-shaved, he having indulged in the luxury of a shave at the last station, and he looked for all the world like an old woman.

He made fun enough, during the rest of the journey, to cause his companions to forget their troubles.

At Ante-Bar, in the meantime, all was expectation. Almost the whole town was out to greet the new schoolmarm, and to have a look at her. The young folks of the town were especially interested.

A place was all prepared for her at Jem Patterson's house, where it had been decided she should board, and Sally Ann had a steaming hot supper ready for her.

But, the stage was late. All were impatient. Each minute seemed ten.

At last, however, just about an hour after dark, the stage came rolling into the town and drew up in front of the post-office.

The postmaster stepped forward, hat in hand, and opened the door.

Out came Phineas Skynn and Levi Poppenheimer. No lady was there, and great was the disappointment the postmaster felt.

As he stepped back, however, the passengers on top were just getting down, and he caught sight of the red and green striped Mother Hubbard gown.

Quickly stepping forward he held up his hands, and said:

"Allow me, ma'm, ter help ye down,

An' welcome ye ter this heur town;—"

He got no further. The man who wore the

peculiar rig glanced down, and then in a high and half-cracked falsetto voice, cried out:

"Oh! Don't mind me, old hoss! Don't mind me! I kin git down from heur ez slick ez a cat kin lick her paw. Don't mind me!" And he clambered down.

The poet fell back with a groan.

"Great jumpin' William Hennerly Cæar!" cried Bill Twicker. "What did I tell ye?"

"Oh! Great Scott, an' all ther hull fambly!" gasped Jem Patterson.

And a hundred other exclamations followed.

"Wal, what on 'arth ails ye?" the man in the gown cried out, still in the disguised voice. "Be ye all gone crazy?"

Ante-Bar, as a whole, was completely paralyzed.

The poet of the Bar tried to speak but could not.

"Wal, great snakes an' bug-juice!" cried he in the Mother Hubbard and sun-bonnet, "what does ail ye? Hain't ye never see'd a woman afore? Does my natural beauty o' face an' form stagger ye? That it? Thunder! Wait till ye see me in my Sunday-go-ter-meetin' rig! Then ye'll stare, you bet!"

Judge Hucklebee was the first to find power to speak.

"Madam," he said, "is it possible that you are the lady who expects to become the school-ma'm here?"

Now, the fellow named Jim was quick-witted, and he saw it all at a glance. He was mistaken for the lady passenger. Here was a chance for sport that was not to be missed.

"O' course I am!" he cried. "Great horned toads! What did ye expect? Did ye expect ter see a rosy-cheeked little dame o' sixteen, er thar'bouts, wi' a mouth ez purty ez th' red side o' a ripe peach? Say! Don't my appearance suit ye? Think I ain't purty? Wal, ye don't know me yet, that's all! Whew!" and catching up the trail of the gown the man whirled around on one heel, "I'm a daisy from 'way back, I am, an' don't ye forgit it! Say, ain't ye goin' ter receive me? Show me th' man as has charge o' this heur affair!"

That man was Uncle Daniel Derrick.

He had been standing at one side, trying to realize his awful position, but at this last demand he fainted dead away.

"Wal, hang my old stockin's!" he of the Mother Hubbard cried. "This goes ahead of all! I knowed I was purty, but dast my garter-buckles if I ever thort I was purty enough ter cast sich a spell over a crowd ez I have casted heur!"

The other passengers of the stage-coach, who saw how it was, laughed till they cried.

"Holy smoke!" cried Jem Patterson, "she can't come ter my house, that's flat! She'd skar ther kids inter fits, an' Sally Ann would scalp her on th' spot. She'd snatch her bald-headed on th' fu'st round!"

"Say, Jeff," said Bill Twicker to Jeff Parsons, "maybe you an' Tom Billings will change yer minds now, an' try ter marry her after all."

The young men both groaned.

And groan in spirit did all the people of Ante-Bar who were present.

"Wal, ef this heur ain't a sociable lot o' he critters, I never chawed terbakker!" cried the man in the gown. "I expected a royal reception heur, an' what do I git? Say, you galoots! Is thar not a single one among ye that is man enough ter ax me up ter drink? Ef thar is, let him sing out."

CHAPTER X.

A WELCOME SURPRISE.

JUST how it would have terminated, we will not venture to predict; but there came new actors upon the scene, and the fun was stopped.

Some water sprinkled in Uncle Dan's face had brought him quickly to his senses again. He was soon on his feet.

The new-comers were—first, Cibuta John, leading his horse. At his side walked a negro, none other than Snowball White. Upon the horse rode the negro's mistress, Clara St. Clare.

In front of the post-office, between it and the coach, they stopped, and Cibuta helped the lady down.

"Citizens of Ante-Bar," he said, "allow me to introduce the lady who is to become school-mistress here—Clara St. Clare."

The lady bowed and the crowd gave vent to a loud cheer.

"That cooks my goose!" said the man "Jim," and quickly he threw off his bonnet and striped gown.

Uncle Daniel Derrick was now himself again, and stepping to the front he doffed his hat, made a bow, and said:

"Welcome, fair lady that ye are,

Welcome heur to Ante-Bar.

We welcome ye—"

But his address was far too long to be given in full here. It was expressive of welcome, hope for health, happiness, success, etc.; and ran on, rhyme after rhyme.

When he had done, the lady said in reply:

"Sir, it would be folly for me to attempt so eloquent a speech. In truth, I will attempt no speech at all. I thank you, one and all, for this kind welcome to Ante-Bar, and hope that at least a shadow of the good things you have wished for me may fall athwart my path. I can say no more. I am very tired, and beg to be taken to my stopping-place. To-morrow, I hope, I shall meet you again, to make your better acquaintance."

Judge Hucklebee then spoke.

He introduced Jem Patterson, and explained that arrangements had been made for her to put up at his house. Like the postmaster, he wished her happiness and success. Then he bade her good-night.

Jem Patterson then conducted her to his home and introduced her to his Sally Ann, who welcomed her heartily.

"Now, gentlemen," said Cibuta John, the moment the lady was gone, "I have a little business to transact right here and now, and a little speech to make. I hope all will pay attention. Wait! I'll mount my horse, so that all can see and hear me." And he did so.

"Now," he continued, as he took a small notebook from his pocket and glanced at a page of it, "is there present a man named Levi Poppenheimer?"

"Dat ish me!" exclaimed the old Jew, as he pushed to the front. "Vat ish it, mine frient?"

"Well, Mr. Poppenheimer, I have here a little property belonging to you. Please examine it, right here in the presence of all, and say whether or not it be all right." And as he spoke he placed into the old Jew's hands the very things that had been taken from him by the road-agent.

"V'y! bless mine soul!" the old Jew cried. "Mine goot frient, how ever did you get dis for me? Pless you! mine goot mans, pless you!"

"Is it all there?" Cibuta asked.

"Yes, mine frient, it ish all here, efery t'ing v'at vas daken from me py de robber."

"All right. Now, Phineas Skynn will please step to the fore."

Mr. Skynn stepped.

"Is this your property?" holding before him the things of which he had been robbed.

"Yes, oh! yes, sir!" cried Mr. Skynn, most joyfully.

Cibuta delivered it to him, and the lawyer actually shed tears of joy.

Gerald Keyne was the next called, and he accepted his property with as good a grace as he could command.

And so, in turn, all of the men who had been robbed were called up, and their property was returned to them *in toto*.

It was a most welcome surprise to them.

"Now," said Cibuta John, when he had delivered the last man his money and other effects, "no doubt you are ready to hear me explain this little matter."

"Yes! yes!" cried everybody at once.

"Well, gentlemen, it is easily done. This forenoon I overheard four men, right here in town, plotting to waylay and rob the stage; and I resolved to take a hand in the game myself. I rode down the trail beyond the point where I had heard them say they intended stopping the stage, and when it came along I stopped it myself. Then I robbed every man aboard, making a safe deposit company of myself for the time being. Having seen me return the property to each man, however, you of course understand my object."

"But," queried the driver, "how did ye git hold o' sich a disguise ez ye had on?"

"That was a rig that I had made some time ago to wear at a masquerade down at Cibuta. I had it in my gripsack, and it came right into use."

"Wal, you're a plucky cuss, anyhow!" the driver declared. "You saved our wealth fer us, ez sure as guns! We was stopped ag'in by four fellers, an' I tell ye they looked sick when we told 'em our leetle story. It war a good joke, all around!"

"Three cheers fer Cibuta John!" some one cried out, and the three cheers were given with a hearty will.

"There is one thing that I cannot understand, sir," said Gerald Keyne, "and I'd like to ask a question."

"Fire away!" replied Cibuta.

"Well," said Keyne, his face flushing, "what I would ask is this: How did you get Miss St. Clare to leave the stage coach and go with you?"

"Why, I hurriedly explained things to her, allowed her to see my honest face, and she agreed at once. In truth, she looked upon it as a mighty big joke."

"That's all very well," said Keyne, "but would it not have been more manly in you to have met us and warned us of the danger? Then we could have defended ourselves and the lady."

"A good idea, I must say!" answered Cibuta. "A mighty good idea! But, out here in this wild country it is not necessary to give such warning. Travelers ought to expect such things to happen at any moment. As to defending the lady, you made no effort to defend her against one agent. What would you have done against the four?"

"But, you held us at a great disadvantage," Keyne persisted.

"Yes, I'll admit that," said Cibuta; "but then it is a disagreeable way that road-agents have, you know. I have no doubt the four you met afterward held you at even greater disadvantage."

"You bet they did!" cried the driver.

Keyne flushed painfully.

"You seem to understand road-agent work pretty thoroughly," he sneered.

"Well, yes; I have been stopped more times than once, my friend. This is my first trial at it myself, however."

"Perhaps it is."

"To continue my story," said Cibuta John, not noticing the remark, "I lifted the lady upon my horse, and then I and her servant walked, leading the animal. Our progress was slow, which accounts for our not getting here earlier. Besides, we turned away from the main road in order to avoid the agents."

"Say! who is them agents?" asked Bill Twicker.

"Pardon me, friend," was the reply, "but I have concluded to mention their names to Judge Hucklebee privately. I think it will be best to do so."

"That's all right," said Bill; "no offense, pard."

"If he has any names to mention," said Gerald Keyne, half-aloud.

Cibuta John heard him.

Springing from his horse he strode up to the man, and cried:

"See here, stranger! If you know anything against the character of Cibuta John, I want you to spit it right out here in the presence of all, or else hold your tongue. You hear me! Where I am best known, I am called a prickly-pear; and if you know anything of the nature of that acanaceous plant, you can form an idea of what I am like when I get my war-paint on. Now, as I said before, if you have anything to say about me, say it right out! If not, then just shut right up, and—stay shut!"

The sharp's face flushed, and his hand sought his hip.

"Best go easy, my friend," Bill Twicker cautioned. "Prickly P'ar is a holy terror, an' he'll wipe th' hull street up wi' ye in jest about a merry twinkle o' a burro's hind leg!"

"I have no desire to quarrel, and much less to fight," said Keyne, "but this fellow has insulted me, and—"

"You're a liar!" cried Cibuta John.

Instantly Keyne drew a revolver, but he was too late. With the quickness of a lightning flash Cibuta had him covered.

"No you don't!" he cried. "I never call a man a liar unless I can prove it, and when I do call that name, I am prepared to back it up. I say you are a liar! I have not insulted you, sir. You, on the other hand, have made two or three unpleasant remarks reflecting upon my character, and now I demand that you spit out what you have got to say, or shut up entirely."

With an angry oath the man thrust his revolver back into his pocket, and turned away.

"You have me foul now," he hissed, "but we shall meet again!"

"No time like the present," said Cibuta John.

Keyne did not turn back, however.

When the whole story of the stage-robbing affair was made known to the citizens of Ante-Bar by the driver and others, Cibuta John was loudly cheered.

"Three cheers more for him, I say!" shouted Tom Billings. And again three lusty cheers rent the air.

"An' three more fer th' school-marm!" cried Bob Burdock.

And again three mighty shouts went up.

But, all things come to an end, and in an hour's time the town was quiet.

The lawyer, the Jew, Gerald Keyne, and Clara St. Clare's servant, Snowball White, all put up at the Dew-drop Inn; Cibuta John engaging a room near his own for the old dorky, who seemed to be strongly attached to him.

Clara St. Clare, in the mean time, was pleasantly located in a neat little room at the Patterson mansion.

CHAPTER XI.

AGAIN THE SILVER DAGGER.

A WEEK passed quickly by.

Cibuta John had denounced the four road-agents to Judge Hucklebee, and they had been duly warned to make themselves scarce at Ante-Bar, a warning which they had the good sense to heed.

A vote of thanks was tendered to Cibuta John for the service he had rendered in purifying the town of its objectionable characters.

Clara St. Clare had opened her school, and it was progressing finely. She was loved and respected by all whom she met.

It was wonderful to note what a change had suddenly come over the young men of the town.

There was Jeff Parsons, for instance. He wore his frilled shirt every day in the week, and as it was always clean it was supposed that he washed and ironed it every night. This he denied, but it was evidently true. He no longer wore his trowser-legs inside his boots, either.

Then, too, there was Tom Billings. He had no frilled shirt, 'tis true, but he appeared with a red one and a blue one of flannel on alternate days, with a blue tie for the red one and a red tie for the blue one.

The other young men of the town were similarly affected, and it did not require a prophet to explain the why and wherefore of the case.

Their hearts had gone out to the "school-marm."

She, on her part, treated them all kindly, and any one of them would have laid down his life for her, almost.

Ere three days had passed, these young men had discovered that if there was any one thing that Ante-Bar stood actually in need of, that one thing was a night-school. They felt that they must brush up their "larnin'," and they expressed their wish to Uncle Daniel Derrick.

Uncle Dan mentioned the subject to the "school-marm," and she gave her consent to open a night-school for three hours each evening, from six o'clock till nine.

Accordingly, the night-school became an established institution, and all the young men—and some who were not so young—attended.

It soon became apparent that Cibuta John and Clara St. Clare were on quite friendly terms with each other.

They were often seen together, and Cibuta John even became her assistant in managing the night-school.

Poor Nettie Hucklebee's honest little heart was deeply pained at this. She loved Cibuta John, and consequently her feeling toward Clara St. Clare was not very friendly.

But, what could she do? Several times, in obedience to her father's wishes, she had avoided being introduced to her hero, even when she knew that he had expressed a strong desire to make her acquaintance.

She could only weep silently and alone, and obey her father's commands.

One thing she was pleased to notice, Cibuta John was not the only one who was paying attention to the school-mistress. If he were in love with her it was certain that he had a rival.

That rival was Gerald Keyne.

A word about that individual will not be out of place here.

He was from Omaha. There it was that he had first seen Clara St. Clare, when she stopped for a day in that city while en route to Ante-Bar. Her face had pleased him, and learning that she was going to a wild Western town, with only her old negro servant for company, he resolved to follow and make her acquaintance. All the way from Omaha to Ante-Bar he had persecuted her with his attentions, and he still continued to do so, though never a sign of encouragement did he receive.

It was the wish of Nettie Hucklebee's heart that Gerald Keyne might win his way into the "school-marm's" favor, and that Cibuta John might be left out; but it did not seem at all likely to happen.

She could not receive her hero's attentions herself, and yet she did not like to see them bestowed upon another.

Such is human nature.

Could Nettie have known exactly how the situation stood, however, she would have felt more contented.

Between Cibuta John and Gerald Keyne no words ever passed. Keyne took care to avoid the "Prickly-Pear" as much as possible. He evidently had no desire to come in contact with him in a hostile way, and there was little prospect of their ever coming together in any other.

As for the two ladies, they met frequently, and were, to all appearances, quite friendly. On the part of the school-mistress the appearances were genuine. And Nettie— Well, she could but admire her new friend, but— "But" is an expressive word.

Such was the situation at the end of the first week.

Times at Ante-Bar continued to be what the citizens called "red-hot." The new school running; the night school at fever heat; a spelling-bee one evening; a recitation by the postmaster on another; all in all, it was a live town.

Late one afternoon Cibuta John was returning to town from a short prospecting tour in quest of silver, when he was suddenly startled by hearing the beating of a horse's hoofs at full run just ahead of him, and coming in his direction.

A moment later the horse burst out into sight, and he recognized its rider as Nettie Hucklebee.

The moment the horse came in sight, Cibuta John saw that he was beyond the control of his mistress, and running away.

At the same instant, Nettie cried out:

"Oh! Save me! Save me!"

Her danger was great and imminent. Both horses were upon a narrow ledge of rock that lay about twenty feet above the creek, a ledge where it required the greatest care for two riders to pass when they happened to meet on the trail at this point.

Cibuta John had but an instant in which to act.

Slipping from his horse he took a step forward, and grasped with one hand the root of a stunted tree that grew out of a crevice in the rock.

Barely had he done so when the maddened horse was upon him, and then with a spring as quick as a flash of lightning he caught the young lady around her waist and snatched her from the very jaws of death.

The next instant the runaway steed struck Cibuta John's horse, and both animals rolled over the ledge and fell with a sickening crash to the rocks below.

"Thank God you are safe!" Cibuta cried, fervently, as he held the lady for a moment in his arms and gazed down into her frightened eyes.

"Are you injured?"

To Nettie Hucklebee it was a moment of happiness unspeakable.

"No," she replied, "I am not at all injured; only terribly frightened." And she released herself from his arms. "Oh! How can I thank you, sir?"

"By allowing me to escort you to your home," Cibuta John replied, "and then by permitting me to make your acquaintance afterward in due form."

"The first is granted, sir; but the second, I—"

"Well?"

"I cannot promise."

"Why?"

"Because, my father will not approve of it, I fear."

"Such being the case then, I shall enjoy the privilege you grant, for the present; I warn you though that I shall not give up the second-named condition by which you are to thank me." And he glanced at her laughingly.

One of the horses had been killed outright by the fall, and the other had both of its forelegs broken. That one Cibuta John put out of its pain by a bullet from his revolver, and then he and Miss Hucklebee started on foot to return to the town.

Nettie was supremely happy. At last she was walking with and talking to him whom she had loved for many a day in secret.

It was fully two miles from the scene of the accident to the town, and the two walked very leisurely by mutual though unspoken agreement.

Neither was anxious to hasten the termination of their first meeting.

When they came near to the big cottonwood tree that has been mentioned before, Cibuta John was bending his head and talking earnestly to the beautiful girl at his side, and she, with her cheeks all aglow, looked ten times prettier than ever.

Neither of them saw Judge Hucklebee standing there until they came full upon him directly under the tree.

The old gentleman's face was white with rage. Here was a sight he had little expected to see. In his blind passion he believed that his daughter had deceived him, and that this was not her first meeting with this good-looking stranger.

In no gentle tone he bade the girl go home at once. She tried to explain, but he would hear nothing. He bade her go. So, with a parting glance at Cibuta John, she went on alone.

"I was not aware, sir," the judge exclaimed then, "that you had made my daughter's acquaintance."

"Nor had I, an hour ago," Cibuta replied. "I have just saved your daughter from a horrible death."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"How—where?"

Cibuta John explained; and when he had done, the judge said:

"I can never repay the debt of gratitude that I owe you, sir. Had my daughter been killed it would have been a death-blow to me. I must forbid, however, your making her acquaintance any further. She is yet but a child, and her heart is not to be trusted. To be frank with you, sir, your good-looking face might play the deuce with her happiness. You are surely world-wise enough to see my meaning in its true light, and I hope you will respect my wishes."

"Then you do not consider me worthy of her love, if she were to honor me by bestowing it upon me?"

"You must remember, sir, that you are a stranger to me."

"Then I shall at once take steps to satisfy you as to who and what I am, sir, and that I am an honorable man; for I tell you plainly that I shall use every honorable means to win your daughter. I love her."

Judge Hucklebee was struck dumb.

"How can you love her, when you have been but a week and a day in the town?" the judge asked.

"You shall know, sir. My love for her was not born in an hour. A little over a year ago, sir, I had the strangest experience of my life. I was riding along the main street of the town of Cibuta one day, when suddenly I fell into a trance. I fell from my horse and was carried into a house, where for a quarter of an hour or more I remained unconscious. While in that state I had, we will say, a dream. I dreamed that I was in an old cabin. It was almost dark at first, but it soon became light enough for me to see. Outside, a furious thunder storm was raging. As I looked around the cabin my eyes suddenly rested upon the face of a beautiful girl. For several moments I gazed at her, and then the vision vanished and I came to."

"That face has been constantly before me ever since; and, sir, it was the face of your daughter—Nettie Hucklebee."

Judge Hucklebee's face was as pale as death. "Was it fate? Was the old witch's prophesy to be fulfilled? No! He would not have it so!"

"My daughter can never be anything to you," he cried. "I forbid your ever speaking to her again!"

"I am sorry to have to set aside your authority, sir, but you have heard what my intentions are."

"I say it shall not be!" the judge exclaimed, in loud and angry tones. "It shall never be!"

"I have every reason to hope that it shall be," said Cibuta John. "I think she already regards me with favor. She it was, sir, as I have since learned, who threw this silver dagger at my feet almost under this very tree on the night of my arrival here." And as he spoke he took the dagger from his pocket and held it by its point for the judge to see it. "And, sir, the note that was attached to its handle was written by her."

"My God! Again the silver dagger!" And with face more pale than ever the judge recoiled from it in horror. "Why do you not banish the accursed thing?"

At that moment other persons appeared upon the scene.

They were Gerald Keyne, Bill Twicker and Jem Patterson.

Instantly they paused. What could this mean? Why the judge's pale face and angry, excited manner? Had he and Cibuta John quarreled? It certainly looked so.

"See!" exclaimed Keyne, "the fellow has a dagger in his hand! Was he about to commit a crime?"

"No, it cannot be!" said Bill Twicker. "Ci-

buta John is not that sort of man. See! his face does not look as though he were in a passion!" "I'll bet they've had a rumpus o' some sort though!" Jem Patterson declared.

At sight of the new-comers the judge turned and walked away toward his home by a narrow path that made a circuit of the hotel, and Cibuta John continued on down the road toward the hotel, speaking to the three men as he met and passed them.

"There's a look in his eyes that I don't like," Gerald Keyne declared.

Both Bill Twicker and Jem Patterson, however, failed to note any unusual expression in them, though they felt satisfied that there had been some angry words between Cibuta John and Judge Hucklebee.

CHAPTER XII.

A MURDER FOUL.

EARLY next morning the town of Ante-Bar was thrown into a fever of excitement such as it had never before experienced. The people stood with blanched faces, and with hearts fairly chilled with horror. A cowardly murder had been committed right in their very midst.

The victim was Judge Hucklebee.

At an early hour his servant rushed out into the street with the cry that the judge was dead—that he had been murdered.

Few people were around at the time, but the news spread like wild-fire, and in a short while a great crowd stood before the judge's house.

The servant said she had gone up-stairs to call her master at that early hour, as he had directed her to do, and that she found him lying in bed, cold in death, with a knife of some kind buried in his breast.

No one, thus far, had gone in to investigate the matter. The crowd needed a leader.

Presently Uncle Daniel Derrick, Bob Burdock, Bill Twicker, Gerald Keyne and one or two others arrived upon the scene, and they entered the house without delay.

The servant at once conducted them to the judge's room.

There upon his bed the judge lay, cold in death—as the servant had said, and buried to its hilt in his breast was—the silver dagger.

At sight of it the men—except Gerald Keyne—drew back in horror. The latter, pointing to it, and at the same time looking at Bill Twicker, said:

"You remember where we saw that last, do you not?"

"Yes, I reckon I do," Bill replied.

"And you remember the circumstances that attended?"

"Yes—yes."

Poor Bill was greatly grieved. He had taken a strong liking to Cibuta John, and it was hard for him to believe him guilty of a crime like this.

Bill knew that his own evidence would be most damaging to Cibuta, but he resolved to modify it as much as possible, and to work for the defense.

"Well," said Keyne, "let us look around here and see what clew we can find. Let nothing be disturbed, however, till we get down to business officially. Ah!" And with the last exclamation he sprang forward to the window and picked up something from the floor.

"What is it?" asked Bill.

"Look and see for yourself," the sharp answered, and he laid a peculiarly-shaped piece of silver in his hand as he spoke.

Bill recognized it instantly. It was a piece of a Mexican spur—a piece of the very spur worn by Cibuta John.

"Your first duty, gentlemen," Keyne continued, "is to arrest Cibuta John, that fancy, Mexican dressed man who last had this dagger in his possession, and of whose silver spurs this seems to be a piece."

Several more men had made their way into the room by this time, and some of them were ready to follow Keyne's advice.

"It is plainly your duty," the latter went on, "plainly your duty as law-abiding citizens. If the man is innocent, he will have every chance to prove it, and he will be none the worse off. Come! if you want a leader follow me!"

"Jest hold yer hosses right thar fer a minute, pard, till ye hear me talk once!" said Bill Twicker. "It happens that I am next in office to ther unfortunate jedge thar, an' ef ye please, I'll take this—this heur dilemmer by ther horns an' have a tussle with it. Am I right, boys?"

"In course you are," said Bob Burdock. "It strikes me that us citizens o' Ante-Bar kin attend to this case."

And Uncle Dan Derrick added:

"Yes, Bill is right, ez he always are; An' we ther citizens o' ther Bar Kin take this case an' put it through, An' ax no help, dear sir, from you."

This was decidedly a set-back for Gerald Keyne, but he took it in good part.

"That's all right," he said. "I'm glad to be let off. As no one else seemed to take action though, gentlemen, I felt it my duty to make a move in the matter. No offense, I hope."

"That's all right, too," said Bill Twicker.

"Don't think because we wur set back at first an' didn't make no move, thet we are a-goin' ter do nothin'. Not much! Heur is a murder most foul, an' we means ter know who done it. What you said about arrestin' Cibuta John was all O. K., but ez I am now sheriff o' this town, I'll take ther lead myself."

Gerald Keyne stepped back with a good grace. The men looked carefully around the room, but nothing further was discovered, except that the murderer had evidently gained entrance into the room through the window, having climbed to the top of the piazza in order to do so.

"Wal, pards," Bill Twicker presently said, "we must do our duty. We must find and arrest Cibuta John. Two of you stay heur, an' don't allow a thing ter be touched," and having named the two men whom he desired to have stay in the room, he went out, followed by the crowd.

He went straight to the Dew-drop Inn.

"Is Cibuta John up yet?" he asked.

Bill had no suspicion that his man had left town. He could not think him guilty. Therefore he was not surprised at the reply:

"No, he has not come down yet."

"Then show me to his room."

The proprietor of the hotel obeyed, and in a few moments Bill was knocking at the door of Cibuta John's room.

There came no answer.

Bill knocked again.

Still no answer came.

Then he gave a series of raps that resounded all through the house.

"Hullo!" a voice within cried out, and they recognized it at once as that of Cibuta John. "Hullo! what's up! Who's there?"

"It is me—Bill Twicker."

"All right. Half a minute, pard," said Cibuta, and he sprang out of bed and hurriedly slipped his clothes on.

In a moment he opened the door.

He was greatly surprised to see so great a crowd, but he calmly asked:

"Well, friends, what is it?"

He noticed that more than one had revolvers in hand.

"Pard," said Bill Twicker, as sheriff heur, it is my duty to arrest you."

"Arrest me? What for?"

"On surspicion thet you are th' murderer o' Jedge Hucklebee."

Cibuta John's face turned deathly pale.

"Good God!" he cried. "Do you mean it? Has Judge Hucklebee been murdered?"

"Yes, pard, an' surspicion p'int's direct to you."

"How—why?"

"Because th' silver dagger, which was last seen in your possession, is th' weepin' that did ther deed; an' because this heur piece o' your spur war found on ther floor in th' room."

Cibuta John cast a quick glance to where his boots lay. True enough, one of the spurs was broken, and this was the missing part.

"I suppose you will give me a fair trial?" he asked.

"Jest ez fair a trial, pard, ez possible."

"Then I submit to arrest. I am innocent of this crime, and I have no doubt that I can prove it to your satisfaction. Disarm me, gentlemen, and then allow me to finish dressing and I will be ready to go with you."

He was quickly disarmed, and then he put on his boots, coat and hat, and was ready.

He was conducted at once to the Hucklebee place, and to the bedside of the murdered man.

"My God!" he cried, "this is a horrible crime! Does Miss Hucklebee know of it yet?"

"Yes," answered the woman servant, "an' she has been out o' her mind ever since I told her."

"Some one go down to Jem Patterson's at once," said Cibuta, "and tell the school-mistress to come here immediately. Tell her that I send for her, and that Miss Hucklebee needs—"

"No need to send," said a voice at the door, "for I am here." And Clara St. Clare entered the room. "Where is Nettie?" she asked.

"In her room," said the servant. "Come with me."

And she led the way. "Poor girl!" said Cibuta. "It must be a terrible trial for her."

"Well, let us come to business, gentlemen," he continued, after a moment of silence. "I suppose you intend holding an inquest, and if so I hope you will make haste with it, put me in jail if you will, and then turn your attention to the finding of the murderer; for I—I swear it—am innocent!"

In due form then, the inquest was begun. The jurors were chosen, and Bill Twicker acted as coroner.

The first witness was Gerald Keyne. He testified to the scene between the prisoner and the judge on the previous afternoon. He said that the judge had seemed very angry, and that his face was pale, as though the prisoner had threatened him. The prisoner had held in his hand the silver dagger. He, Keyne, said he had been among the first to enter the room after the crime. The deed had been done with the silver dagger. Upon the floor he had found a piece of a silver spur. The piece exactly fitted one of the prisoner's spurs where it had been recently broken.

Jem Patterson was next called. He corroborated the testimony of Keyne in regard to the scene under the cottonwood tree.

Then Keyne motioned that some one else take the chair, and that Bill Twicker be called as a witness.

This was done, and Bill, too, corroborated the story told by Keyne and Jem Patterson concerning the scene under the tree. He added, however, that Cibuta John had not seemed to him to be in a passion, and that he did not think he had threatened the judge.

The woman servant was next called. She said Judge Hucklebee had retired at his usual hour on the previous night, telling her to call him early. When she went up to call him she found him dead.

Then Cibuta John was called. He said he had retired at ten o'clock, feeling very sleepy. Had fallen asleep at once, and had slept unusually sound. In fact, had not awakened once until he was called by Bill Twicker. He swore that when he retired to bed the silver dagger was in his pocket, and that neither of his spurs was then broken. When questioned about the scene under the cottonwood tree, however, he refused to say anything. He admitted that the judge had been angry. He also admitted having the silver dagger in his hand, but said part of the conversation was concerning it. When asked, he also told about saving Miss Hucklebee's life.

The case was given to the jury, and they decided that the judge had been foully murdered, and that there was sufficient evidence to warrant them in holding Cibuta John for trial.

Accordingly the prisoner was put into jail.

There he was afterward visited by lawyer Phineas Skynn, who, in return for the favor Cibuta had done him by robbing him in order to save his money from being taken by real robbers, offered to defend him when his case came to trial. He also expressed his sincere belief in his entire innocence of the crime, and Cibuta retained him for the defense.

On the following day Judge Hucklebee was buried, and the next day was set for the trial.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRIAL.

THE greatest day that Ante-Bar had ever seen was the day of Cibuta John's trial.

No building in the town was large enough to accommodate one-tenth of the crowd, and so court was held out of doors.

At nine o'clock sharp the new sheriff of the town, Bill Twicker, took his seat, and without any preliminaries whatever announced that "This hour court is now open for biz."

When Cibuta John was brought out it was noticed that his face was slightly pale, but otherwise he was the same as usual. He looked to be anything but a prisoner about to be tried for his life.

Several times he had been visited by the school-mistress, Clara St. Clare, and once—this very morning—by Nettie Hucklebee.

This had given the people of the Bar plenty to talk about, and the general impression was that Nettie did not think him guilty of the crime.

Not until all was in readiness for the trial to begin was it discovered that no one appeared as prosecutor.

"Wal, what's ter be done?" asked Bill Twicker.

"If it please the Court," said Gerald Keyne,

"I will act the part of prosecutor."

"All right," said Bill; "take right hold."

Then the battle opened.

Witnesses were called in about the same order as at the inquest, except Bill Twicker, who de-

cided that "no jedge could be a jedge an' a witness ter wunst."

At length Nettie Hucklebee was called. She was not present, and some one was sent to bring her. What she was wanted for was not plain, but Keyne had called for her, and she must be brought.

When the man who had been sent for her returned, however, it was reported that she could not be found.

Such being the case, the prosecutor closed without her testimony.

Then Lawyer Skynn took hold.

The first man he called was Mr. Keyne himself.

"Where were you and the other gentlemen going," he asked, "when you came upon the prisoner and Judge Hucklebee under the cottonwood-tree?"

"Going to look at a piece of land, sir," was the reply.

"Very good. Now, sir, please tell us where you were on the night of the murder—I mean, how and where did you spend the night?"

"I retired to my room about eleven o'clock, sir, and slept soundly till four o'clock in the morning. Then I arose and went out. I slept at the Dew-drop Inn."

"You heard no sound during the night?"

"None, sir."

"That is all."

The next witness was Levi Poppenheimer, the old Jew.

"Where were you on the night of this crime?" Skynn asked.

"At de Tew-trop Inn," the Jew answered.

"Your room was right next to the one occupied by the prisoner, was it not?"

"It vas, sir."

"Well, Levi, did you hear any sound in the prisoner's room during the night?"

"Vonce I heard a slight noise, put it vos not much."

"What was it like?"

"Vell, it vas like somet'ing vas drop on de floor."

"Not a very loud noise?"

"No, only a schmall noise."

The next witness was Clara St. Clare's negro servant, Snowball White.

"Where did you sleep on the night in question?" was asked.

"At de Dew-drop Inn."

"Your room, too, was right next to the prisoner's room, was it not?"

"Yes, boss."

"Well, did you hear any noise in that room during the night?"

"Yas, I heard dat ar' drappin' sound what de Jew jes' tol' you erbout, sah."

"What did it sound like?"

"Wal, kyan't jes' tell, boss; but it war erbout like yo' drapped yer boot on de flo'."

"That will do."

The next witness was Jeff Parsons.

"Mr. Parsons," said the lawyer, "you were instructed to make certain investigations at the Dew-drop Inn. Tell us what you discovered."

"Wal, sir, an' Bill, an' gentlemen o' ther jury," Jeff began, "I'll tell ye ther hull story. Under the directions o' ther lawyer thar, me an' Tom Billings we went ter ther hotel ter look inter this heur matter a leetle. We went up ter Cibuta John's room first o' all. Thar we see thet a feller might easy git inter a winder offen ther shed roof. We got out thar an' looked around. We found some marks ter prove thet some one had got in that way lately. Then we looked all around close, and found thet ther man hed climbed up one o' ther posts. An', right at ther top o' ther post thar was a nail a-stickin' out, an' thar on that 'ar nail we found this." And he held up a strip of common cloth about one inch wide by three inches long, on one end of which was a button.

This evidence created a great stir.

Next called was Tom Billings, who told the same story.

Then the case closed.

In his address to the jury, Keyne said:

"Murder is seldom committed without a powerful motive. In this instance we are at a loss to account for the motive which led to the crime. That there was a motive, however, and a powerful one, we are fully satisfied. We know that the prisoner and Judge Hucklebee had a quarrel on the afternoon preceding the crime, and it has been shown that the prisoner had the silver dagger in his hand at that time. Who can say that the coming of witnesses upon the scene did not save the life of Judge Hucklebee then and there?"

"On the morning of the crime we found the prisoner—where? In bed! He claimed to be asleep. We had to knock the house almost down to rouse him. That, gentlemen of the

jury, to say the least, looks suspicious. Was he not feigning sleep? How, when the town was in an uproar, and all the doors in that hotel were on the wing, slamming and banging as people came hurrying out—how, I say, could he sleep right on?"

"Now, let us picture him as he appeared when he did this hellish deed. He waited, no doubt, until the whole town was wrapt in sleep. Then he left his room by a window, and descended from the shed roof to the ground by one of its posts, or supports. Witnesses have sworn to having seen marks that prove some one actually did descend from the shed that way. Who was it if not Cibuta John? The piece of cloth and button—pshaw! A shrewd lawyer's trick!"

"Going to Judge Hucklebee's house, he climbed up to the roof of the piazza and entered the window of the judge's room. Softly then he crossed the floor, raised his arm and plunged the silver dagger to its hilt in the sleeping man's breast."

"Gentlemen of the jury, it was a horrible moment. Little wonder the man hastened away leaving the dagger there. Little wonder that he broke one of his spurs in climbing through the window, and left a portion of it on the floor. Little wonder that, when he returned to his room he was so nervous that he made a noise in undressing and getting to bed."

"Gentlemen of the jury, there is but one course open to you. You must bring in a verdict of murder, or forever be the laughing-stock of your fellow-citizens."

Such was the sum and substance of Keyne's argument.

When he had done, lawyer Skynn rose up with a smile of contempt upon his lips.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he began, "as the learned gentleman for the prosecution has sagely observed, murder is seldom committed without some powerful incentive. But he has failed, utterly and miserably failed, to show you what the incitement was in this instance. And why? Because, as he had to acknowledge, none can be found. He has told you that there was a motive, however, and a powerful one; of that he is fully satisfied. And so am I. But, that is no proof that the prisoner at the bar is the man who did the deed. Before we can believe him guilty, we must know, positively know, what object he could have in committing such a crime. Finding no motive, we are bound to believe him innocent."

"The learned gentleman has told you that the prisoner and Judge Hucklebee had a quarrel on the afternoon preceding the night of the crime. How does he know this? Does he produce witnesses to prove what passed between the two men at that time? No, he does not! We know that the two gentlemen were seen standing under the big cottonwood tree up the valley yonder, and that Judge Hucklebee seemed greatly excited. Shall I tell you the cause of his excitement? I can do so, and will. It was this: The prisoner at the bar had just saved the judge's daughter from a horrible death. Relating the circumstances to the judge, in all the horrible reality, was the cause of his pale face and his horror-stricken attitude. You all know how dearly the judge loved his daughter. Imagine then what his feelings would naturally be under the circumstances."

"It has been shown, too, that the prisoner held the silver dagger in his hand on that occasion. And how was he holding it? I will tell you. He held it by its point, with the handle of it toward the judge! Does this look like threatening the man's life? Does it not rather look as though he was offering the weapon to him? Of course it does."

"Let us now go forward to the morning the crime was discovered. Where was the prisoner found? In his bed! Does this look as though he were guilty? Were he a murderer would he not have made his escape ere the crime was found out? Common sense will answer the question for you. Because he happened to sleep soundly that morning, should you accuse him of feigning sleep? What was his conduct when arrested? Look at him now, gentlemen. Does his face indicate that he is guilty? or, rather that he is innocent? He is innocent, gentlemen of the jury, as innocent as you are!"

"Who, then, is the guilty one? I wish I could tell you."

"The learned prosecutor has pictured him to you in the act of taking the life of your most worthy citizen. He presented a picture that should cause the very soul of every honest man to recoil in horror. He showed how he crept from his room in the dead of the night, crept down from the shed roof to the ground, climbed

up to the piazza roof of Judge Hucklebee's house, entered the room and killed its inmate.

"Can you believe this? No, of course you cannot!"

"Supposing it to be true, however, for sake of argument, let me call your attention to one or two points. You know the prisoner to be a cool, brave man. Is it likely that he would allow anything to so alarm him that he would leave the room in such haste as to forget the dagger, which was known to have been in his possession? Is it likely that on setting out upon such a mission he would have gone with a pair of jingling spurs attached to his heels? Give these points your attention, and you can but acquit him."

"Allow me, gentlemen, to call your attention to what the learned prosecutor is pleased to call 'the trick of a shrewd lawyer'—thanking him for the compliment, the strip of cloth found by Jefferson Parsons and Thomas Billings on the roof of the shed of the hotel. What does this tell us? I will tell you what it tells me. It tells me that this strip of cloth came from some part of the clothes worn by the murderer of Judge Hucklebee."

"I will give you my theory of the crime. Some person who had cause to hate or fear both Judge Hucklebee and Cibuta John, climbed to the latter's room and purloined the silver dagger. He also broke one of his silver spurs and took the piece with him. Then he went to Judge Hucklebee's house, killed him, leaving the dagger in his breast and dropping the piece of spur upon the floor, knowing full well where suspicion would fall. Then he made his escape."

"Find the man who wore the garment from which this piece has been torn, and you will have the murderer."

"Again, would not the act of breaking the spur have caused the noise heard by Levi Poppenheimer and Snowball White? And, would not some sleep-producing drug have prevented the noise waking the prisoner, and also caused his sound sleep next morning? Ask yourselves these questions."

"In conclusion, gentlemen of the jury, let me warn you that you can only decide this case in one extreme way—*guilty or not guilty*. To declare the prisoner guilty is to send him to death upon the most trifling of mere circumstantial evidence."

And so, after seven long hours, the case closed. What we have given of it here is but a brief synopsis of it as a whole. It was a case of many peculiar points and errors and misrulings, which can be accounted for in two ways: first, by lack of legal knowledge on the part of the judge and the prosecutor, and second, by cuteness on the part of lawyer Skynn, who only called attention to such points as did not favor his case.

Gerald Keyne made a few final remarks, and then Judge Twicker charged the jury as follows:

"Pards, th' case is now drawed down to a fine pint fer you ter settle. Jest grapple wi' it now, an' give us yer honest opinion strictly 'cordin' to th' evidence. Did Cibuta John kill Jedge Hucklebee, or did he not? That is the question that now troubles th' public mind o' Ante-Bar, an' it is fer you ter say. Use one side o' ther pick jest th' same es' other. Make no difference at all. Now, git yerselves inter ther school-house, an' when ye'r ready wi' yer verdict we'll let ye out."

The twelve men rose up, marched to the school-house, and entered.

Five minutes later they had agreed and were allowed to come out.

When they had returned to their places the judge said:

"Pards, hev ye 'greed?"

"We hev," the foreman answered.

"Then stand up. An' you, prisoner, stand up an' face the jury. Now, pards, let's hear it."

Clearing his throat, the foreman said:

"Your Honor, an' pards all, we found ther evidence strong—mighty strong, and our verdict is"—and he held the word for a few seconds, enjoying the awful suspense—"not guilty."

The shout that arose was deafening. The verdict expressed the public opinion exactly. With wild cheers Cibuta John and Lawyer Phineas Skynn were lifted upon the shoulders of strong men and carried to the hotel.

CHAPTER XIV.

A HANGING-BEE.

SUCH red-hot times as these the town of Ante-Bar had never seen.

When the excitement had somewhat subsided, Cibuta John made a public address.

He thanked the people for the fair trial they had given him, and assured them that they had

made no error in acquitting him. And in conclusion he swore to hunt down the murderer of Judge Hucklebee, if it proved a life-long task.

Three rousing cheers were given as he concluded.

"One thing I want," Cibuta said, when he could again make himself heard, "and that is—the silver dagger."

"By heavens! pard, I think we'd best put th' cursed thing whar it will never come to light ag'in! It has worked ill enough in this heur town!"

So spoke Bill Twicker, and many of those present echoed his opinion.

"Now, pards," said Cibuta, "I don't blame you for wanting to get rid of the thing, but I want it for a purpose. I want to use it in my man-hunt. I want to use it in my search for the murderer of Judge Hucklebee."

"Thet bein' ther case, ye shell hev it!" Bill declared.

"Who has got it now?"

"It is now in my possession," said Gerald Keyne.

"Then please hand it over ter Cibuta John," Bill requested.

Keyne did so, and at sight of the hated blade, a solemn hush fell over the crowd.

Cibuta glanced at it as he took it, and as his eyes fell upon the inscription on the blade, he exclaimed:

"Heavens! What means this?"

"What be it, pard?" was asked.

"Why, the inscription here on the blade is not what it was!"

"Ther devil! What is it now?"

Cibuta held it up and read aloud:

"The silver dagger's work is ended,
Blood shall ne'er more stain the brand;
A charm for good 'tis now intended—
Him who keeps it near to hand."

Here was a mystery indeed. One after another examined the weapon, but not another word could be found. When and how had this change been made? No one could say. The dagger looked just the same as ever in every other way, and the inscription looked as though it had been there for years. No new cutting was it.

Then arose the question, "was this the same silver dagger?"

"I can swear that it are ther same one thet killed Jedge Hucklebee," declared Bill Twicker, "fer thar's a private mark thet I put onto it myself!"

"And I can swear that it is the original dagger," said Cibuta John. "I noticed that small dent near its point when first it came into my possession."

It was a mystery that no one could solve.

As Uncle Dan Derrick, the rhyme-making postmaster remarked:

"Thar are some things in this heur land,

Which human man can't understand."

And verily the old man was right.

As it was after four o'clock when the trial had closed, the afternoon was now almost gone.

The general excitement was slowly abating, but all of a sudden it was again raised to the highest point, when it became reported around that Clara St. Clare and Nettie Hucklebee were both missing from the town.

Inquiry proved that they had not been seen since early morning.

What could it mean? Search must be made for them at once!

Before action could be taken, however, the crowd near the hotel was startled by a wild, weird shriek close at hand, and the next instant a wild-looking creature sprung into their midst. It was an old woman, barely half-clad. Her hair was long and uncombed, her hands were like the claws of some wild beast, and her face wore an expression that was almost hideous to look upon.

"Mother Wolf!"

"The Mountain Witch!"

Such were the cries heard on every hand.

The old hag paid no attention to any one in particular, but stretching forth her arms in an impressive manner, she cried:

"Half a mile beyond that big tree up yon valley are the women ye seek, and they are in deadly peril. Fly to their aid at once! Do not lose a moment—an instant!"

Some one in the crowd tried to put a question to the old woman, but again she raised her arms and cried:

"Go! Go! GO!"

And as she uttered the last word she again gave vent to her wild shriek, and ran away.

"What means this?" asked Cibuta John. "Is she crazy?"

"It means that we're wanted up the valley,

and wanted *bad!*" cried Bill Twicker, in reply. "Come!" And he started off on a run.

Cibuta John and a score of others were with him instantly, and away they sped like the wind.

When they had gone some distance they were urged to still greater speed by hearing a woman's voice crying loudly for help.

On they flew at their highest possible speed, and still endeavoring to increase it by every effort.

Presently they came upon a most startling sight as they rounded an abrupt bend.

There stood Nettie Hucklebee, with a revolver in each hand, pointing straight at the breasts of two men whom she was holding at bay, while at her feet lay Clara St. Clare.

"Thank Heaven! help at last!" cried Nettie.

"Take those two men prisoners, men of Ante-Bar, and hold them to account for the murder of my father!"

The hands of the two men were instantly securely bound. They were no strangers to the men who had thus come so timely upon the scene. In truth, they were well known to them—they were "Giant" John Jones and Billy Bobsled.

Cibuta John had instantly knelt down beside Clara St. Clare.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Are you injured?"

"I fell and have sprained my ankle so badly that I cannot stand," was the reply.

"Well, we'll carry you home then," said Cibuta. And calling two of the men to aid him, the lady was lifted up tenderly, and all started for the town.

"Wal, leetle lady," said Bill Twicker, "what means this heur, anyhow?"

"Just what I was about to ask," said Cibuta John.

"Shall I tell you now, or wait till we get to the Bar?" Nettie asked.

"Spin it right out now," said Bill. "We are most anxious ter hear."

"Well," Nettie began, "I will tell you. I did not believe Mr. Cibuta John guilty of murdering my father, and so this morning I asked the school-mistress to go with me to see old Mother Wolf."

"We set out early for the old witch's cabin, and when we arrived there, we told her our errand. She brought out her magic tub, and showed us a likeness of the real murderer. It was Giant John, assisted by Billy Bobsled."

"Ther deuce! An' you two gals sot out ter find 'em?"

"Yes, sir. Mother Wolf told us just where to go, and we resolved to do it. We had a very long walk, but we found and captured our men—as you see. We had them thus near to town, when my companion fell and sprained her ankle, and then we were in a bad fix. All I could do, was to stand and hold my prisoners at bay, and at the same time scream loudly for help. And, thank heaven! you came."

"And it was Mother Wolf who sent us to your aid," said Cibuta John.

"Indeed! Then she must have watched over us!"

"So it would seem."

The two ladies were taken to the Hucklebee house, where the women of Ante-Bar, gave every attention to the "schoolmarm's" sprained ankle.

The men then turned their whole attention to their prisoners.

Both stoutly denied all knowledge of the crime. They claimed that they had been prospecting just beyond their five-mile limit of approach to the town, when the two girls suddenly appeared, both armed, and got the "drop" on them.

"Do you swear you are innocent of this crime?" asked Cibuta John.

"Yas, I sw'ar it!" cried Giant John.

"And you are willing to do almost anything to prove it?"

"Yas—yas! Anything!"

"Well, then," and Cibuta drew forth the silver dagger, "we, the people of Ante-Bar, demand of you that you sit all night upon Judge Hucklebee's grave, holding this weapon in your hand. As you are innocent, of course you will not have any fears—"

But the giant *had* fears, as was plainly evident. His face had turned deathly white, his legs began to weaken under him, and he could barely stand.

"Thunder!" cried out Billy Bobsled. "I can't stand this heur! I'll confess ther hull biz." And he did so.

It will be remembered that when these two men were carried out of the town on a rail, they made threats against both Judge Hucklebee and Cibuta John. And thus they had carried their

threats out. Coming to town in disguise, they had put up at the Dew-drop Inn, at least had taken supper there, and during that meal Billy Bobsled slipped a sleeping-potion into Cibuta John's cup of coffee.

Then about midnight Giant John climbed up to the shed-roof of the hotel, and entered Cibuta John's room. There he secured the silver dagger, and broke a piece from one of the spurs to leave in the judge's room. He meant to kill two birds at one shot. He would kill the judge, and Cibuta John would hang for the crime.

"It's a lie! A lie!" Giant John screamed aloud in terror.

"Perhaps this is a lie too, my friend," said lawyer Skynn, as he advanced and fitted the little piece of cloth with the button attached—the piece that had been found by Jeff Parsons and Tom Billings—to the very place in the giant's coat from where it had been torn. "Perhaps this is a lie, but I rather guess not!"

It was proof conclusive, and both men confessed their guilt, at the same time begging for mercy.

Every man present was of one mind. Ropes were quickly procured, and taking the prisoners about half a mile up the valley, out of sight of the women and children of the town, they had a grand "hanging-bee."

The two rascals were buried side by side, and not even a stone placed to mark their unhonored graves.

"That settles that case," said Bill Twicker, as they returned to town, "and Jedge Hucklebee is avenged!"

"An' ther country is well shut o' 'em, too!" declared Jem Patterson.

And yet another surprise awaited the people of Ante-Bar that night.

When the stage-coach arrived, in it came an old man who at once inquired for Levi Popenheimer.

Mr. Popenheimer was right on hand.

The two shook hands, and then entered the post-office where quite a crowd was waiting for the mail.

Gerald Keyne was there, and the old Jew directed the old gentleman's attention to him in a careful manner.

"Yes," said the old gentleman, "it is he."

Instantly the old Jew crossed the floor to where Keyne stood, and "covering" him with a cocked revolver, exclaimed:

"Gerald Keyne, alias Rodney Blake, bank-thief and forger, you are my prisoner!" And ere the man could recover from his surprise, handcuffs were snapped upon his wrists.

"Who are you?" he cried.

The supposed old Jew threw off his disguise, and answered:

"I am Bill West, the detective!"

Keyne gave up at once.

Then the old gentleman came forward and explained.

He was the president of a Western bank, and Rodney Blake had been its cashier. Some months previously he had absconded with about fifty thousand dollars of the bank's funds, and Detective West had been on his track ever since.

How well he played the part of an old Jew, has been shown.

Keyne was lodged in jail, and the next stage took him away from Ante-Bar to serve many a year in prison.

His mad love for Clara St. Clare had brought him to Ante-Bar, and the same cause had urged him to work hard to secure Cibuta John's conviction for murder, thinking if he were removed his chance for winning the lady would be better.

"Good-by, honored sir," Phineas Skynn said, as Keyne left the town. "I would enjoy being for the prosecution on your trial, I can assure you. Oh! Wouldn't I make it warm for you! Good-by."

"Good-by, lawyer!" called out Detective West. "Don't forget your friend—the old Jew!" And the stage was gone.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

ONCE more Ante-Bar settled down to its usual state of peace and quietness, and several weeks slipped quickly by.

Clara St. Clare had recovered from her injury, and the school was in a flourishing condition.

The school-mistress had changed her quarters, and was living with Nettie Hucklebee. The two were now the best of friends, and Cibuta John was happy in the love of both.

Snowball White was there too, their servant and protector.

It was generally known now that Cibuta

John's choice was Nettie, and many were the lonely masculine hearts that longed for Clara St. Clare.

But at last one day the charm was rudely broken.

Cibuta John, Nettie Hucklebee, Clara St. Clare, and Snowball White, too, all came down to the post-office to meet the stage-coach.

This was an unusual event, and it was naturally supposed that some one was expected to arrive.

Out of pure curiosity a larger crowd than usual gathered there that evening.

At last the stage came, and the moment the door was opened out sprung two merry children, one a boy of six and the other a little girl of five.

Instantly Clara St. Clare rushed forward and caught them in her arms, covering their faces with kisses.

Then followed a handsome man of about thirty years of age, who had to assist himself with a cane.

Instantly the "schoolmarm" threw herself into his arms.

Jeff Parsons, Tom Billings, and a dozen others felt like going down for their weapons and demanding satisfaction there and then. But they evidently thought better of it.

In a moment the school-mistress turned her radiant face toward the crowd, and said:

"People of Ante-Bar, allow me to introduce my husband and children. This man, gentlemen, is my husband, Mr. James St. Clare. And these are my children."

"Three cheers o' welcome!" cried Jem Patterson. And they were given with a will. It was noticed, however, that Jeff Parsons and Tom Billings did not join in with their usual vigor.

"And," said Cibuta John, when he could make himself heard, "allow me to inform you, kind friends, that Mrs. St. Clare is my sister."

Three cheers more were in order, and promptly given.

It was even so. And now to explain.

When the people of Ante-Bar advertised for a school-teacher, their advertisement happened to fall under Cibuta John's observation. He at once forwarded it to his sister, Mrs. St. Clare, telling her to apply for the place, and he would go to Ante-Bar to protect her.

Mrs. St. Clare's husband had met with an accident, and had been unable to work more than a year, and the lady gladly applied for and accepted the situation.

Mr. and Mrs. St. Clare, with their children, made their home at the Hucklebee mansion, and Mr. St. Clare looks after the late judge's interests for Nettie, assisted by Cibuta John.

Cibuta John has large silver interests there now, and was recently elected to the office of sheriff of Ante-Bar.

At some not-far-distant day there will be a wedding at Ante-Bar, and Nettie Hucklebee will become Cibuta John's wife.

Mother Wolf's prophecy seems in every way likely to come true.

The old witch still lives in her cabin on the mountain, and is kindly cared for by the people of the town.

Phineas Skynn has an office at Ante-Bar, and gets along fairly well. He is a "character" in every sense of the term.

Jim Patterson, Bill Twicker, Jeff Parsons, Tom Billings, Bob Burdock and others are still citizens of Ante-Bar, and still strive to uphold the honor and dignity of the town.

And Uncle Daniel Derrick, the rhyme-making postmaster, Heaven forbid that we should forget to mention him!

He is still postmaster at the Bar, and as full of rhyme as ever. A hundred times a day choice gems of poetry fall from his lips. Nor would it do to close our romance and not give one more selection from his bounteous store. But what shall it be? Ah! Here is just the thing—the remark he made when told of the execution of "Giant" John Jones:

"Now, when come letters from afar—
Marked for John Jones at Ante-Bar,
I'll know they're for Cibuta John;
Because th' other John is gone."

Our story is told.

Often of an evening, when the citizens of the town congregate in Bob Burdock's store, to "smoke, and tell lies," their conversation turns upon the incidents we have related; and it gives them pleasure to tell, to the gaping tenderfoot, of the "red-hot" times at Ante-Bar that followed the coming to their town of Cibuta John, the Prickly Pear from Cactus Plains.

THE END.

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